

PERSEPHONE RISES,
1860–1927

MARGOT K. LOUIS

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*Dedicated to my father, Harry Louis, with deepest love and gratitude, and
to my beloved nieces, Winnifred R. Louis and Robyn Louis.*

*Thanks and warm affection to those of my friends and colleagues who
have done so much to make this book possible.*

Persephone Rises, 1860–1927

Mythography, Gender, and the
Creation of a New Spirituality

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Foreword

The plan to bring this book to press was hatched in the waiting room of a cancer treatment centre. As Margot Louis faced a diagnosis of terminal cancer, she mourned that she would not be able to see this book—the devoted work of many years, originally intended as the first of a multi-volume work—through to publication. She believed that she would have time to finish the manuscript but knew that she would not be able to secure a book contract, put the manuscript into house style, or copy edit and proofread the final product. That was how I—helped by a group of Margot’s friends and colleagues—came to shepherd this book through press. One of Margot’s last acts was to sign the contract with Ashgate, a joyful moment for both of us as she knew then that her work would see the light. She died a week later.

I have been honoured to help bring that plan to fruition, and I would like to thank the friends of Margot who have helped me in the difficult task of copy editing a manuscript after the author’s death: Gordon Fulton, Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Heather Reid, and Judith Mitchell have all contributed to the difficult judgments about what Margot would have wanted. I am grateful to Yisrael Levin (Margot’s doctoral student, himself a specialist in Victorian myth and literature) for adding a bibliography of literature about Proserpine; to my copy-editing assistant, Jessica Gillies, for her many hours of painstaking work; and to my student assistant, Brittnee Russell, for her labour in transferring footnotes to and starting to construct a list of works cited for this book. I would also like to thank the many colleagues who have responded to my barrage of questions about phrasing, sources, and style: Kim Blank, Laurel Bowman, Nicholas Bradley, Alison Chapman, Luke Carson, Susan Doyle, Chris Fox, Linda K. Hughes, Janelle Jenstad, Magdalena Kay, Matthew Kay, Gary Kuchar, Mary Elizabeth Leighton, Yisrael Levin, Krista Lysack, Robert Miles, Allan Mitchell, Judith Mitchell, and Herbert Tucker. I wish to acknowledge the financial support of the Department of English at the University of Victoria that enabled me to hire an assistant for this task. Finally, I am grateful to Ann Donahue at Ashgate Press for taking on the challenge of publishing a book under these unusual circumstances.

I would like readers of this book to know that I have followed Margot’s instructions in changing her work as little as possible. I have adjusted punctuation, citation, and capitalization to follow MLA style, corrected minor typographical errors or infelicities, transferred footnotes from Margot’s published work to this manuscript, and constructed a list of works cited. If there are errors in these aspects of the book, they are my own and not the author’s.

Lisa Surridge
University of Victoria



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Preface

Thee I revisit now with bolder wing,
Escap't the *Stygian* Pool, though long detain'd
In that obscure sojourn, while in my flight
Through utter and through middle darkness borne
With other notes than to th' *Orphean* Lyre
I sung of *Chaos* and *Eternal Night*,
Taught by the heav'nly Muse to venture down
The dark descent, and up to reascend,
Though hard and rare

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost* III.13–21

As spring returns to the Northern Hemisphere, she rises slowly in the south: the constellation Virgo, the Virgin, dim and difficult to see but for the brilliant star Spica, the wheat-sheaf or “spike” of wheat which the Virgin bears in her left hand. The brightest of the stars marking her right arm is Vindemiatrix, the “female grape-gatherer”; this constellation is in Western astronomy indelibly associated with “the life of fruits and corn,” the agricultural cycle (Cornelius 114; Swinburne, “The Garden of Proserpine” 171). The starry Virgin is she whom the Greeks called Koré (the maiden), Persephone, the goddess who descends into the underworld to rise again; the Romans assimilated this figure to their own corn goddess, Proserpina.

The goddess Koré, Persephone, Proserpina moves powerfully through the literature written in English over the past century and a half. Interest in goddesses generally revived in the nineteenth century, thanks to the cultural shifts created by Romanticism, and thanks also to the work of scholars like Johann Jakob Bachofen, whose book *Das Mutterrecht* (1861) proposed that patriarchal society must have been preceded by matriarchy. At the same time, a new fascination with deep and hidden forces within the psyche or the culture gave fresh urgency to the symbol of a vitalizing or appalling underworld. Moreover, the gradual collapse of religious faith in the nineteenth century was intimately connected with the development of fresh intellectual and emotional approaches to death, resurrection, and mythic thinking itself. The slow, difficult alteration in the position of women also prompted new ways of thinking about violation, marriage, and the relationship of mother and daughter. All these changes were reflected and explored in the literature that employs the myth of Persephone.

This book focuses on Victorian and early Modernist literature, showing how male and female writers argued over the myth of Persephone, revising and reinterpreting one another's representations of the goddess and versions of her story. At one level, this study may seem to record a confusion of warring voices and incompatible impulses, as each writer tries to tug the goddess in one direction or another, making her serve the writer's own agenda. At a deeper level, this is a tale of cultural changes reflected, and to some extent effected, through the

controversies and literary creations explored here. The rise of paganism (among other alternative spiritualities) and the undermining of Christianity's exclusive supremacy in Western religious thought; the struggle between asceticism and a reviving reverence for the body; the brief but culturally significant dominance of pessimism; the Modernist celebration of fertility and of the life force; and, above all, the long and still-continuing struggle over whether the mythmaking imagination is to be understood as masculine and is to work chiefly or exclusively on male experience—these are the topics I hope to illuminate. My argument is that the myth of Persephone provides an ideal nexus for these movements; by studying the tale as it is explored, celebrated, and recreated in literature, we can understand how these developments are connected. Through the nineteenth century, Christianity was weakened as an imaginative force partly by the revival of an increasingly hedonistic Hellenism but also, more severely, by a shift in sensibility that made the pain of life seem incompatible with the concept of an omnipotent and benevolent God. This shift in sensibility contributed to the brief dominance of pessimism at the turn of the century: the painful world seemed to many writers depleted of value, and the act of bringing new life into the world appeared to be morally unjustifiable. At the same time, however, a contrary strain of thought was beginning to emerge, powerfully supported by the uncovering of fertility cults across much of the globe. The modern imagination turned to the contemplation of primitive ritual to regenerate its own shaken faith in life and its shattered sense of community. Most significantly, these developments made room for fresh female perspectives on the mythic imagination, the nature of sexual freedom, the complexities of reproduction, and the potential of a female deity.

In examining these processes, it will be useful to invoke Barbara Newman's concept of "imaginative theology." The "imaginative theologian," Newman says, thinks by means of the "devices of literature"; he or she "works with images and believes, with Christine de Pizan, that 'the road of the imagination ... reveals the face of God to whoever follows it to the end'" (Newman 298, 297).¹ Newman is discussing the fruitful similarities between fictive visions and the personal narratives of visionaries in the Middle Ages; as applied to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, the concept can be still more valuable. One can in fact argue that part of the accomplishment of this later period was to demonstrate that imaginative theology is the only kind that exists or, as William Blake put it, that "the Poetic Genius ... was the first principle and all the others merely derivative" (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Plate 12, xxi). What allowed this perception to be taken seriously was a century and more of effort by mythographers and poets, anthropologists and literary critics, theologians and novelists, all engaged in an anguished and stirring debate that mediated the shift from various forms of Christianity to a far greater spiritual diversity.

This process has often been represented, misleadingly or at least simplistically, as a counter-religious secularization, a progress toward a purely rationalistic consensus. However, a close examination of the scholarship and literature most

¹ I am obliged to Maidie Hilmo for drawing my attention to this work.

influential in the creation of new attitudes toward myth, and new ways of using and relating to myth, will show that much of this work is informed by profound religious impulses that have gone unrecognized as such largely because the spirituality they expressed and developed was not Christian. Until very lately, even the discussion of spiritual vision, in any form outside the dominant versions of the leading religions, seemed to smack of the eccentric and the unscholarly. (Even Christian or Jewish mysticism has not been quite exempt from such prejudice.) Too often, writers like A.C. Swinburne, Jane Ellen Harrison, and H.D.—writers who were openly non-Christian, or anti-Christian, yet who approached religion seriously and with passion—have been routinely denigrated or ignored. Yet it is impossible to understand what was really going on in the development of attitudes to myth and literary uses of myth without taking seriously the development and redirection of spiritual energies at the same time.

Until very recently, “myth criticism”—that is to say, a criticism of literature focused on texts’ allusions to and use of narrative structures drawn from myth—weakened itself by failing to fully appreciate the spiritual dimension of myth and related religious practices. The old style of myth criticism (which flourished from the 1970s to the early 1990s, when it came into disrepute) was based on universalist models of myth, such as the Jungian theory of archetypes held within the “collective unconscious.” It traced in all literature conscious or unconscious evocations of such popular images as James Frazer’s dying god, Joseph Campbell’s hero with a thousand faces, and the great mother or great goddess who came to dominate several versions of woman-centred spirituality. In the last two decades, however, we have come to understand how deeply this very syncretism is rooted in the practices of nineteenth-century “armchair anthropologists,” practices widely condemned and disdained in the anthropology of our own time. Gradually, we have come to realize that it is essential in mythography to see how a myth operates within its cultural context; similarly, it is essential in literary criticism to see how a mythical allusion or pattern of mythical echoes within a literary text operates within that text’s cultural context. We begin also to understand that each text that responds to or exploits a myth, explicitly or implicitly, participates in its culture’s discourse on the significance of myth in general and the meaning and usefulness of that particular myth.

In short, myth criticism is becoming historicist, responding to the specific historical and cultural contingencies informing each mythopoeic text rather than asserting a universal and transcendental value reaffirmed in each appearance of the myth. During much of the 1990s, myth criticism was in abeyance, as critics needed to develop a sophisticated understanding of the cultural context of each period before such issues could be satisfactorily addressed. In Victorian studies, the work of Frank Turner, Robert Ackerman, and Catherine Gallagher (among others) through the last two decades of the twentieth century provided a strong foundation for such understanding, yet it was only in the twenty-first century that a new myth criticism—employing the methods of historicist and cultural studies—has begun to develop, in the works of such scholars as Dinah Birch and Sharon Weltman.

The present study begins by outlining two general mythographic trends in the nineteenth century: first, the slowly increasing respect for ancient Greek paganism as an expression of spirituality as opposed to the dismissal of ancient religion at the start of the century as superstition and frivolity; second, an increasing emphasis on Greek chthonic ritual as a worthy focus for ancient religion and a corresponding tendency to dismiss the Olympian gods of Homeric mythology as fictions of immortality rather than figures who could mediate to their worshippers some understanding of primal feeling, loss, death, and passion. Both of these trends brought Persephone into new prominence. A chthonic goddess, dragged into the world of death like a mortal rather than enjoying the endless bliss of Mount Olympus, forced into the experience of loss and passion rather than embodying a beautiful serenity, this forgotten child of the Olympians now took centre stage.

In Chapter 1, we explore the classical and English heritage of texts concerning Persephone and the emergence of the goddess in Romantic literature as an avatar of the Romantic self, losing and then regaining her original closeness to Mother Earth. I first paraphrase and analyze the three primary classical sources for the tale of Persephone or Proserpina: the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, the version of the tale in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Claudian's *De raptu Proserpinae*. Then we see how the best-known allusions to Proserpina in Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton offer a variety of paradigms for interpreting the myth, which may be seen as a prophetic affirmation of Christian doctrine, or as a sardonic illumination of the relationship between the sexes, or as the growth of a female power into sexuality and self-knowledge. (In subsequent chapters it becomes apparent that the first of these three paradigms is desperately asserted in the Victorian age, against the insistent growth of radically new interpretations; the second and third of the paradigms continue to be influential to the present day.) Romantic explorations of the myth, from Mary Shelley's closet play to Margaret Fuller's seminars, show the figure of Persephone developing from a naive child to a formidable embodiment of the maturing mind of humanity. In the course of this process, unexpected and fearful issues arise; a new underworld opens.

Chapter 2 shows how J.J. Bachofen's theory of primitive matriarchy and John McLennan's theory of "marriage by capture" as the basis of patriarchal marriage offered a new lens through which to see Persephone's story: the myth then becomes a revelation of marriage as a fundamentally violent institution and one that creates a bond between male and female at the expense of an original bond between mother and daughter. Poems by Jean Ingelow and Dora Greenwell in the 1860s and 1870s explore the tragedy of such a development; they also show how the daughter's sexual initiation can affect her own growth, and they consider how far mother and daughter may overcome the alienation that has been imposed upon them.

In Chapter 3, we see how a rival tradition develops in Persephonic poetry from the 1860s to the end of the century. A.C. Swinburne and his male contemporaries, contemplating the goddess in her darkest aspect as queen of the underworld, use her to face fundamental spiritual questions: Does death offer immortality or oblivion? Is life worth living? Is the will to life itself a blind, amoral force to be rejected

and transcended? The debate over pessimism becomes more urgent as pessimism comes to dominate avant-garde thought through the *fin de siècle*. For writers and artists like Swinburne, Walter Pater, D.G. Rossetti, and Mathilde Blind, Proserpine becomes the embodiment of a world and a linguistic system without meaning or hope; writers like Lewis Morris, George Meredith, Isabella Valancy Crawford, and Alfred Tennyson employ the same trope while passionately attacking the nihilistic vision of life with which it has become associated; and William Sharp, Arthur Stringer, and Marjorie Pickthall expose the terms of this debate without attempting to resolve it. Finally, after the turn of the century, Robert Bridges and Edith Wharton present this very debate as a quarrel between Persephone and her mother, linking the argument over pessimism to the ambivalence within the mother-daughter bond that Ingelow and Greenwell had disclosed. As the divine daughter grows up and learns the grim wisdom of the underworld, she becomes more and more hostile to her mother's optimistic and perhaps naive vision of life.

In Chapter 4, the focus shifts from these familial, theological, and philosophical problems to social and aesthetic issues. To give life is to be fertile. Is fertility a value or a nightmare? For Schopenhauer, this was a metaphysical question; for such early Modernist novelists as Thomas Hardy and Willa Cather, the issue retains an important metaphysical dimension but is predominantly a social one. How is fertility warped, or enabled and supported, by present financial, political, and marital institutions? How is female fertility understood, punished, or rewarded within the sexual politics of the day, and is fertility with all its possibilities and concomitant vulnerabilities empowering or disabling to women? In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy both celebrates and laments fertility but seems on balance to respond more powerfully to a pessimistic view of fertility as it acts in his society; Cather, responding to *Tess* both as a novel and as a performed drama, revises Hardy's vision radically in *My Ántonia* and ends with a powerful affirmation of fertility and life.

In their emphasis on the issue of fertility, on emotion rather than theology as central to religious vision, and on group rituals rather than individual faith as central to religious practice, Cather and Hardy show strong affinities with the Myth and Ritual School that was transforming classical studies and anthropology at this period. Yet, far more than the ritualists, the novelists discussed here were keenly aware that the turn-of-the-century fascination with communal Dionysian ecstasies involved a great deal of imaginative nostalgia, projection and compensatory fantasy. The fallen woman with whom Persephone comes to be associated in *Tess* and *My Ántonia* is herself a Victorian creation. She embodies the social construction of female sexual freedom as degraded; she experiences the suffering created by such social constructions; but she also constitutes, in these novels, a vigorous protest against such constructions. Tess's husband, Angel, and Ántonia's chronicler, Jim Burden, react in rather different ways to Tess and Ántonia's "fall," but in each case their reactions expose the sexual confusion of educated and privileged males in their period. At a deeper level, the ways in which these men apotheosize, abandon, and return to the heroines expose the limitations and powers, the functions and the self-deceptions of the mythopoetic imagination itself.

The tale of these developments would be incomplete without at least a glimpse of Persephone's overwhelming popularity among Modernist poets. In this, as in so many other respects, the Modernists are profoundly influenced by the Victorians, fulfilling the Victorian dream even while they suppose themselves to be correcting their forebears' errors and limitations. Chapter 5 examines a selection of Modernist texts from the first three decades of the twentieth century, showing how William Carlos Williams's *Kora in Hell* and the first and third versions of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* call for the regeneration of society: a Persephone figure trapped in the underworld of industrial and capitalist society seeks—and in Lawrence's work finds—escape. The Western world's slow, struggling return to feeling and physicality is perfectly symbolized by Persephone's resurrection; and in this hopeful vision, her mysteries and myth are imbued with a genuine spiritual power, a new paganism that reverses and flouts Christian paradigms.

In the women's literature of the same period, however, although the emphasis is still very much on the need for escape from the underworld, Persephone at times seems the obstacle to escape—as in Amy Key Clarke's *Persephone* and Katharine Bradley's "Pomegranates"—rather than the escapee, the goddess-heroine who enacts our deepest hopes. In H.D.'s duology, *Her* and *Asphodel*, the heroine does become a liberating and self-liberating Koré. Like Clarke and Bradley, H.D. attacks the patriarchal tendencies of classical mythology and attacks also women's sadly frequent collusion with patriarchal convention. Demeter's world of Eleusinian fertility is to H.D., in these texts, a nightmare world of submission, depression, and self-erasure; the mother-daughter bond about which Ingelow and Greenwell could be so delicately ambivalent now represents a fetter that Persephone has to break. Only through a different kind of woman-to-woman connection can real freedom be achieved, as two Koré figures create a new familial structure.

In the conclusion to this study, we consider how the Koré functions in the period covered by this book. Each generation, responding to the shifting contingencies of its own era, but also building on and replying to the work of its predecessors, creates a different vision of her; she becomes a metaphor, a model, a deadly peril, and a regenerative goddess. Yet, more significantly, our altering responses to her show—and help to shape—profound cultural changes in our attitudes to the material world, to sexuality and fertility, to gender and ethics, to the family, and above all to spirituality. What spirituality is, what deity and worship are, what human society can be: these are the questions that Persephone forces us to confront.

Margot K. Louis

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Margot K. Louis

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Introduction

Gods and Mysteries: The Revival of Paganism and the Remaking of Mythography through the Nineteenth Century

I had often wondered why the Olympians—Apollo, Athena, even Zeus, always vaguely irritated me, and why the mystery gods, their shapes and ritual, Demeter, Dionysus, the cosmic Eros, drew and drew me.

—Jane Ellen Harrison, *Alpha and Omega* (1915) 204

From 1800 to the 1920s, the evolution of mythography both informed and was informed by wider cultural developments: the great and difficult project of replacing the Christian mythos that for so long formed the imaginative core of Western culture; the struggle between the drive toward transcendence and a reviving reverence for the material world and its seasonal cycles; the brief but culturally significant dominance of pessimism; and, in reaction, the celebration of fertility and of the life force. The pressure of these very nineteenth-century concerns redefined the study of ancient Greek religion in this era. Throughout the period, we find a recurrent insistence that the mythology of the ancient Greeks (specifically that of Homer) is less deeply, less truly religious than the Mystery cults of the chthonian deities: Persephone, Dionysos, and Adonis. To trace the variations on this theme through the mythography and literature of the period is to see the era's religious attitudes in the very process of formation.

We begin with a specifically Romantic approach to Hellenic religion. The gods of Greek mythology were denigrated as finite in form, limited in sympathy with mortal suffering, separate from humanity in their inhuman beauty and immortal joy—altogether inadequate, therefore, to a Romantic religious sensibility. By contrast, the Greek Mysteries were assumed to have satisfied the religious sensibility because they connected celebrants with one another, with nature, and with the infinite. This opposition between myth and Mystery (which may not seem to be characteristic of ancient Greek religion as we now perceive it) grew out of Christian and Romantic concepts of spiritual experience. More important, underlying this denigration of myth and elevation of Mystery was a very nineteenth-century agenda. In opposition both to rationalism and to a dogmatic Christianity, a pantheistic religious vision was created and projected onto the Mysteries. Further, against the dominant assumptions of the time, some Romantics suggested that the same religious sensibility informed both ancient Greek and modern Christian religion. This view deeply affected thinking about Greek religion through the high Victorian age. However, in the polarized atmosphere of the late Victorian

era, denigrating the Greek gods became a way to attack the Christian cult of transcendence and immortality and the focus on life after death; the exaltation of the Mysteries became a way to celebrate the sacredness of this life, of sexuality, and of the life force. More and more, late Victorians privileged ritual over myth and saw the fertility cult as central to the development of religion, while the myths they still honoured were those pertaining to the gods and goddesses of the Mysteries.

These developments, large as they are, do not make up the whole story. In this introduction, I focus on two entwined threads of a complex web (the attack on the Olympian gods and the exaltation of the Mystery cults) and show how these threads helped to form the larger pattern of Victorian attitudes to ancient Greek myth and religion. The invaluable surveys of Victorian mythography by James Kissane, Janet Burstein, and Frank Turner omit two factors: first, the persistence of a Romantic strain in Victorian mythography; and second, the close relation between mythography and poetry throughout the era. It is an essential part of my argument that British perceptions of myth at this period cannot be understood solely by recourse to British mythography but must be supplemented by recourse both to more sophisticated Continental studies and to British poetry.

In the early nineteenth century, British mythographers were hampered even more than their German contemporaries by the need to conciliate a strong evangelical lobby deeply suspicious of paganism in any form. Romantic and Victorian poetry, however, offered a field in which myth could be used, revised, even explicitly discussed with more freedom than was available to scholars at the time. Poets were not entirely exempt from evangelical pressure, but poetry was to a large extent protected by its traditional associations with myth and by the symbolic mode developed in the Romantic era.¹ Friedrich Schlegel, a leading German Romantic, insisted that mythology was for poetry “a matrix, a sky, a living atmosphere” (81), and Romantic poetry in Britain also quickly developed a vigorous mythopoeic aesthetic. Much early and high Victorian mythography worked out concepts earlier popularized by Romantic poetry, even as poetry through the mid-century laid the basis for a critique of these very concepts and established those emotional associations and thematic emphases that came to inform *fin-de-siècle* mythography. Throughout the century, the profound connection of myth with literature—and especially with poetry—persisted, intractable and inexhaustibly fecund.

¹ Curtius points out that among the Ionian philosophers, and through most of Western Europe at least to the Enlightenment, Greek mythology was believed to be the work of poets: “For, as Herodotus says, Homer and Hesiod created their gods for the Greeks” (8); the revolt against myth was “also against poetry, ... for the Greeks had no religious records, no priestly caste, no ‘sacred books.’ Their theology was shaped by poets” (204).

Wordsworth and the Bonds of Sympathy

Hast thou well considered all that lies in this immeasurable froth-ocean we name
LITERATURE? Fragments of a genuine Church-*Homiletic* lie scattered there ...
nay fractions even of a *Liturgy* could I point out.

—Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34) 3.7.253

The superiority of the Mysteries over Homeric mythology had been argued at least from the early eighteenth century. In *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated* (1737–41), William Warburton insisted that the Mysteries were “the most sacred Part of Pagan Religion” (1: 131) and argued from Plato that they restored the soul “to its original Purity and Perfection” (146). Within the Greater Mysteries of Eleusis, he explained, initiates were taught to dismiss “the Errors of vulgar Polytheism” (149)—to look beyond “the whole Rabble of licentious Deities” described in Homer (148)—and to apprehend and worship the one true God (152). Warburton’s aim was to challenge the growth of free thought by showing support for something very like Christianity in the most sacred strongholds of ancient Greek religion.

By the end of the eighteenth century, however, in the midst of the rising evangelical movement, some felt that Warburton had given the pagan Mysteries too much credit. In *A Dissertation on the Mysteries of the Cabiri* (1803) and *The Origin of Pagan Idolatry* (1816), George Stanley Faber calls paganism a “religion of hell,” a corruption of “the pure doctrine and simple worship” of the Jewish patriarchs (*Origin* 1: 25, 101): the Mysteries, in his view, are only a little better than the mythology (*Mysteries* 1: 341–2). Agreeing that the Mysteries teach monotheism, Faber yet insists that their god was a mere syncretic amalgamation of the Homeric gods, not a “Divine Unity superseding the host” of gods (*Origin* 3: 108–9).

Faber’s hostility to paganism should be seen as a defensive response to Romantic spirituality, a response characteristic of English mythography in the early nineteenth century (Butler 16). His views found an echo even in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the conduit through which so much German Romantic thought was filtered into English culture. Well-read in such Romantic exponents of the Mysteries as F.W.J. Schelling and Friedrich Creuzer, as well as in Warburton and Faber, Coleridge nevertheless stood by the English tradition on this point. As emphatically Christian as Faber, he maintained in the face of his own German authorities that monotheism must have preceded the “diabolical system of polytheism,” that “gross and crude theology” (8: 224, 120): “but for the Mysteries Cabiric, Eleusinian &c I should scarcely concede the possession of a Religion to the Greeks” (8: 85).² The purpose of the Mysteries, Coleridge insists with Warburton, was to counteract Homeric theology (8: 54), as the Mysteries dimly conveyed religious truths more explicitly stated by the Hebrew prophets (11: 1265). While German scholars like Creuzer, Friedrich Schelling, and K.O. Müller so transfigured mythography that by 1830

² See also Coleridge, *Lectures* 55–9 and J.R. de J. Jackson lxiv–lxv. For other references from Coleridge below I am obliged to my research assistant, Yisrael Levin.

it was “the central and dominant tool for the scholarly study of the classical past” (Feldman and Richardson 416), English scholarship in the opening decades of the nineteenth century seemed frozen in resistance to anything that might subvert the unique status of Christianity.³

How, then, did English thought at last come to take ancient Greek religion seriously? Two generations of classicist mythmaking in English Romantic poetry—from Blake’s “To the Muses” (1783) to Keats’s *Fall of Hyperion* (1819)—made possible a new openness in select circles such as the radical group associated with the Hunt brothers through the late Romantic period or the Cambridge Apostles circa 1830.⁴ Yet, among members of the wider public, not until the 1830s could even William Wordsworth’s moderate and cautious view of mythmaking in *The Excursion* begin to gain ground, long after its first publication in 1814.⁵ Wordsworth’s Wanderer explains to his friend the Solitary that myths are “[f]ictions in form, but in their substance truths”; in response to the “Admiration, Hope, and Love” roused or coloured by the life within nature, we feel called to create tales and figures expressing the deepest truths of human feeling.⁶ Zoroastrians, Chaldeans, Greek shepherds, and Biblical patriarchs have all participated in this process, as the Wanderer points out.

To be sure, the Wanderer’s account of ancient mythmaking still privileges Judeo-Christian worship, and his most fervent descriptions of pagan mythmaking are followed by expressions of Christian resistance to pagan idolatry. For instance, the Solitary asks mockingly how the Scottish Covenanters would have viewed his friend’s sympathy with pagan mythopoeia (4: 894–918).⁷ Yet Wordsworth allows the uneasiness in his readers’ minds to articulate itself, only to resolve it by reaffirming

³ The same Bibliocentric approach, as mediated by J.C. Prichard, dominated anthropology through the early nineteenth century, and, though it has been argued that “alongside this public, Christian, ‘ethnological’ version of early nineteenth-century British anthropology there existed an alternative, off-stage, ‘anthropological’ version” in which the phallic cult was fundamental to the development of religion, proponents of this view found great difficulty in getting a public hearing (Leach 218–19).

⁴ See Hunt’s overtly Wordsworthian “Spirit of the Ancient Mythology” (1820) in Feldman and Richardson 377–89. See also Armstrong’s discussion of the Cambridge Apostles (31–4, 54–5, 60–61); she shows that the Apostles’ “conceptualization of myth [was] both sophisticated and contradictory,” drawing as it did on both German and British mythographers from the beginning of the century (31).

⁵ It was not until the 1830s that Wordsworth’s fame and influence became “widespread and assured”; in the Victorian age, “*The Excursion* was regarded as Wordsworth’s great work” (Gill 2, 16).

⁶ *Excursion* 6: 545, 4: 763–887, in Wordsworth 634–6, 660. Further references to this poem will be by book and line number.

⁷ Specifically, the Solitary says Covenanters would have aligned this admiration for myth with “Romish fantasy” (4: 908); in Germany, Creuzer’s emphasis on images and his admiration for the Mysteries led to his work being attacked as crypto-Catholic by Protestant German scholars such as J.H. Voss and M. Lobeck.

the continuity of religious consciousness. At a time when Protestant evangelicalism had gained fresh energy and was rapidly acquiring political influence, he cannily defuses English Protestant hostility by associating any fierce objection to his views with a group of Scottish religious extremists, conveniently lost in the past; he then implies that the very people who would most angrily have condemned pagan worship were profoundly like pagans, though at a higher level. Covenanters resisted idolatry and fled to the wilds because they, like the ancient pagans, felt

A spiritual presence, oft-times misconceived,
But still a high dependence, a divine
Bounty and government, that filled their hearts
With joy, and gratitude, and fear, and love ...

Far less, than these [Covenanters], yet such, in their degree,
Were those bewildered Pagans of old time. (4: 927–34)

The Covenanters are “such” as the pagans, if perhaps closer to the truth. *The Excursion* enables its Christian readers to feel connected to earlier religions by bonds of sympathy and reverence (6: 567–8), yet also to remain reassured that their own religion is loftier than others and that destructive rationalist analysis of dogma is beside the point—since religion is founded surely on the feelings and sympathies of the human heart, “principles of truth, / Which the imaginative Will upholds” (4: 1127–8). Yet the argument itself was perhaps less effective than the tone and mood in which it was conveyed: the relaxed (even prolix) exchange between caring friends, the gentle tolerance, the sympathy that spans the ages.

At the same time, Wordsworth articulates a tension of crucial importance both within classical mythography and, in the wider world, within the great dynamic quarrel between Hellenism and Christianity throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In Book 4, lines 718–62, he suggests that there are two underlying currents within Greek mythmaking. The “lively Grecian” made idols, giving to “fluent operations a fixed shape,” as his observation guided his “studious fancy” (4: 718, 725–8); yet “triumphant o’er this pompous show / Of art, this palpable array of sense,” an undefined and holy “SPIRIT” pervaded the landscape and culture (4: 729–30, 735; emphasis in original):

And *emanations* were perceived; and acts
Of immortality, in Nature’s course,
Exemplified by *mysteries*, that were felt
As bonds ... (4: 738–41; emphasis mine)

Mere “fancy” fixes what is fluid and reduces it to material form, whereas a deeply imaginative reverence apprehends what is indefinable and enacts it in religious Mysteries that foster social connection (“bonds” between human beings) and perhaps also metaphysical connectedness (“bonds” between the human and the divine). Specifically, the “acts / Of immortality” over which Demeter and Persephone presided at the Mysteries were connective, and it is not surprising that in the Romantic period, for the first time, we find a number of poetic works in

English devoted explicitly to the Eleusinian deities.⁸ For the myth of Persephone contains and attempts to resolve the anguish of disconnection. Unlike most Greek gods, Demeter and Persephone are dynamic, capable of essential change in status, power, and temperament. Having lost her daughter to death, Demeter moves from a state of Olympian detachment—of privilege and ignorance—to a Wordsworthian sympathy with human struggles and griefs; Persephone, torn from her sheltered innocence, endures disconnection directly. Mother and daughter are severed by mortality in a way that connects these divinities with mortals; their later reunion embodies for all mortals a promise of reconnection, and their rites at Eleusis create, Wordworth insists, “bonds” informed by a unifying “SPIRIT” affecting city and country, art and religion.

In English writing, this is a new approach to the traditional contrast between Homeric mythology and the Mysteries. Traces of the old approach remain in Wordsworth’s implicit dismissal of Homer’s “gross fictions chanted ... / By wandering Rhapsodists” (*Excursion* 4.732–3); the word “gross” rebukes the licentiousness of the Olympian mythology. Yet Wordsworth criticizes mythology chiefly as the production of the fancy, which injects an element of fixity and disconnection into what ought to be fluid, connective, all-embracing.⁹ Wordsworth transmutes a mythographic commonplace—the contrast between mythology and the Mysteries—into Romantic terms that significantly shift the religious implications of that contrast. In Germany, a similar feat had already been achieved by Creuzer, and echoes of the furious debate aroused by Creuzer’s work may perhaps have influenced *The Excursion*. Certainly, Creuzer’s work sheds light on the issues at stake in Wordsworth’s carefully phrased analysis.

In his *Symbolik und Mythologie der Alten Völker* (1810–12), Creuzer views Greek mythology as inadequately mystical—a childish, uncomprehending plagiarism of Eastern wisdom. The revelations of divine unity attained in India and communicated through the Middle East were degraded by the Greeks’ polytheistic exuberances until, wearied by “mythology’s idle babbling,” some Hellenic sages “comprehended the damage done to religion and philosophy by the omnipotence

⁸ The Romantic poetry on Proserpine merits detailed discussion; here, I will merely mention Barry Cornwall (Bryan Waller Procter), “The Rape of Proserpine”; Mary Shelley, “Proserpine” (composed 1820, first published 1832); Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Song of Proserpine,” composed for his wife’s play (*Proserpine & Midas* 18) but printed as an independent lyric in 1839; and Aubrey de Vere, “The Search after Proserpine” (Victorian by the date but late Romantic by the style). In America, Margaret Fuller mentioned Persephone frequently in her *Conversations on Greek mythology* in 1841 (Healey Dall 41–8, 51–4, 56–9, 136, 159).

⁹ Even this criticism, however, is leveled rather at the systematization of mythopoeic vision into idolatry (through Homeric narrative and sculptured images of the gods) than at the initial mythopoeic impulse, of which the Wanderer speaks sympathetically later (4: 847–87, 6: 538–47). Compare Wordsworth’s criticisms with those offered by Warburton (148) and by Coleridge (“Prometheus” 1017).

of Homeric poetry through the established dominion of myth” (*Symbolik* 1: 209).¹⁰ Only within the ancient Mystery religions was the true spiritual impulse retained, to revive in Hellenistic mysticism (*Symbolik* 1810–12, 1: 208 ff.). Specifically, Creuzer elevated the importance of the Eleusinian Mysteries (*Symbolik* 1810–12, 4: 598). Although he still privileged Christianity above all Greek religion, he insisted that the Eleusinian Mysteries prepared the world for Christianity—morally, by teaching the doctrines of the progressive purification of souls and of the struggle of light with darkness; metaphysically, by conveying the doctrine of emanation (4.3–4, 4.598, 4.593).

The word “emanations,” which Wordsworth uses in *The Excursion* without explanation (4.738), is strongly charged. Originating in Hindu philosophy and appropriated by Neoplatonism, the concept of emanation has been used in Christian theology to describe the relation of Christ and the Holy Spirit to the Father (both “emanate” from the Father). The term can also be used to suggest that God did not create all things *ex nihilo*; rather, all things derive their existence from the Divine Essence. In Creuzer’s doctrine of emanation, all things flow from God and must return to him (*Symbolik* 1810–12, 4.593). This vision could readily modulate into a Christian-inflected pantheism, in which all beings participate in the divinity from which they take their origin and to which they return, rushing (as Carlyle puts it) “through Mystery to Mystery, from God and to God” (266–7). Such Christian-inflected pantheism or Romanticized Christianity at once challenged and reframed the versions of Christianity more familiar to early nineteenth-century England; so “emanation” at this period was a perilously charged expression. Indeed, Creuzer’s implicit endorsement of emanationism contrasts strikingly with Coleridge’s explicit repudiation of both pantheism (in 1819) and emanationism (in 1816 and 1825; see Coleridge 8: 57–8, 11: 417, 1271).

Creuzer appealed to writers and artists precisely because of his “enthusiastic sympathy with the living religious side” of paganism (Feldman and Richardson 387); this enthusiasm led to his denigration at the hands of those who wished to turn mythography into a science.¹¹ Yet he influenced even his detractors.

¹⁰ Translation mine; Creuzer speaks of “*das von der geschwätzigen Sage verdrängte Symbol*” (“the Symbol displaced by the babbling [or ‘idle’] Myth”) and earlier states: “*Es waren die Meister der Alt-Jonischen Philosophie, die den Schaden einsahen, den jene Allgewalt Homerischer Poesie durch die befestigte Herrschaft der Mythos der Religion und der Philosophie brachte*” (Creuzer 1810–12 1: 209). The first phrase quoted here does not appear in Creuzer’s third edition of 1836–42. Laura Kinderman kindly translated for me passages from Creuzer that were beyond my primitive German.

¹¹ For instance, Thomas Keightley in *The Mythology of Ancient Greece and Italy* (1831) declared his wish to “oppose, if possible, an effectual bar to the introduction of the wild fancies of Creutzer [sic] and the mystics into this country” (v). In Germany, the furious controversy over Creuzer’s work drove many scholars into “a rigorous refusal ... to mediate the artistic or religious meaning of the Greek myths for our own time” (Most 45)—despite the powerful examples of such poets as Friedrich Hölderlin or Novalis, who shared Creuzer’s interest in Neoplatonic ideas and perhaps surpassed him in reverent empathy for Greek spirituality (see Feldman and Richardson 328–40).

Though opposed to Creuzer's preference for the Mysteries, K.O. Müller, in his *Introduction to a Scientific System of Mythology* (1825), frames in Creuzerian terms the tension he finds in any living faith between "the tendency to individualize, and the endeavour to comprehend the universality of deity" (185). The Olympian deities can appear delightfully familiar, personal, secular; yet—especially as embodied in the great sculptures of classical Greece—they can also seem static, serene, and, above all, disconnected. The more definite they are in form, the more separate they appear from one another; the more serene and beautiful they look, the more detached they seem to be from troubled mortal life. Given the Wordsworthian valorization of connective sympathy as the essence of religious and moral feeling, this detachment can itself be troubling.

Creuzer's influence on nineteenth-century perceptions of myth in English-speaking countries has been underestimated, perhaps because the *Symbolik* has never been translated into English in its entirety.¹² However, from 1825 through 1851, J.D. Guigniaut translated this massive work into French, ruthlessly reorganizing and revising it as well as adding a formidable apparatus of illustrations and notes (often these notes are essays updating Creuzer's treatment of specific topics, with lavish allusion to other scholars). Since French was more widely studied than German, this adaptation made Creuzer's thought available to many English speakers; Creuzer himself, moreover, praised the translation as "*meisterlich*" or masterly (*Symbolik* 1837, 1: xvi n1). Margaret Fuller quoted his declaration that he need not produce another edition of the *Symbolik*: "His French translator had done it well enough," she observed, "and if readers were not satisfied with his own work, they must have recourse to the translation" (qtd in Healey Dall 157–8). In 1853, Guigniaut's translation was reviewed in the influential *Revue des Deux Mondes* by no less a person than Ernest Renan, who declared that the Mysteries had formed the core of ancient Greek religion and that the mythological element was inessential even to the Greeks (Renan 840).

¹² For example, Bullen states that "the British knew little of the work of Creuzer" (6), yet Coleridge read the first edition of Creuzer's *Symbolik* to pieces—coolly informing the bookseller who had loaned him the work that he, Coleridge, would decide whether to buy the book after it was mended. He also studied the second edition (Jackson, Introduction to 8: lxiv and notes 83, 84 on the same page). Coleridge relied on Creuzer as a source and honoured him "as a man of great learning," though he also attacked what he saw as Creuzer's undue tolerance of idolatry (Coleridge 8: 55, 57–8, 120). Robert Mackay's *The Progress of the Intellect* (1850)—the first major work of English mythography to take account of the previous half-century of German scholarship—draws heavily on Creuzer and calls the *Symbolik* "perhaps the most serviceable book existing (of a philosophical character) on general mythology" (Mackay 1: viii n1).

The Romantic Vision in High Victorian Mythography

In early times poetry and imitative art undertook to interpret nature "It was the poet," says Goethe, "who first formed gods for us, who called us to them, and brought them down to us." Poets were the first legislators, prophets, and hierophants

—Robert William Mackay, *The Progress of the Intellect* (1850) 2: 146

Far into the Victorian era, mythographers were still labouring to modify the deeply rooted British hostility toward paganism. Ruskin in 1856, and even as late as 1869, still feels it necessary to attack both the "bitter short-sightedness of Puritanism" that would reduce classical deities to mere idols, and the "mere infidel folly" of reading Greek myth as decorative—as "a witty allegory, or a graceful lie, of which the entire upshot and consummation was a pretty statue in the middle of the court, or at the end of the garden" (*Modern Painters* 3: 180). In true Wordsworthian spirit, he opens his *Queen of the Air* (1869) with an appeal to sympathy that would bind the present and the past: "You must forgive me ... for not always distinctively calling the creeds of the past, 'superstition,' and the creeds of the present day, 'religion;'" ... I will only pray you to read, with patience and human sympathy, the thoughts of men who lived without blame in a darkness they could not dispel ..." (*Queen* 1.1.2).

Ruskin's clear assumptions about his audience usefully remind us that as English mythography became more comparative, more capable of respecting pagan religion, a gap opened between the students of myth and the general public, which in many sectors retained pre-Romantic convictions long after scholars had abandoned them. As late as 1876, a children's history of Greece by Charlotte Yonge explained that ancient Greeks "were not trained in the knowledge of God like the Israelites, but had to guess for themselves. They made strange stories" (11–12). At the mid-century, it was still commonplace in Britain to privilege Christianity as the one revealed religion.

Yet within a generation, the status of ancient Greek religion (formerly less admired than ancient Greek literature and art) rose with startling energy in Victorian England. By the 1860s, classical paganism had become vital to authors who had openly condemned and belittled it earlier in their careers. Ruskin began as an evangelical, but his late writings were haunted by Athena and Proserpina and his late faith was increasingly framed in pagan terms. Elizabeth Barrett, at first an ardent Dissenter, in "The Dead Pan" (1844) attacked Schiller's Romantic nostalgia for the "vain false gods of Hellas Pan is dead" (Browning 306). Yet by the composition of "A Musical Instrument" (1860), Pan was vividly alive to her. In the mythography of the era occurred a still more striking shift, as pagan and Christian spiritual impulses were more and more confidently connected and, ultimately, equated.

From about the beginning of Victoria's reign, Wordsworthian strategies of reconciliation made a space in which British mythography could begin to flourish. These strategies also decisively shaped assumptions within British mythography. Some Victorian mythographers (such as Robert Mackay and Ruskin) were deeply

moved by Hellenic worship and used it to call for change and renewal in the spiritual life of their own time; others (such as George Grote and Max Müller) were eager to remake mythography into an objective science and so implicitly to encourage secularization in their own age. Some were concerned primarily (like Grote) with myth as a historical phenomenon, or (like Mackay) with the place of myth in the history of religion, or (like Max Müller) with philology as a means of revealing myth's origins and nature. Yet up to about 1870, virtually all mythographers accepted some elements of the Romantic vision of myth. Of these elements, the most important were (1) the assumption that Christianity and ancient Greek religion developed from the same psychological impulses; (2) the view that myth is the poetic imagination's religious response to nature; and (3) the recurrent contrast of Olympian worship with the Mysteries.

The Continuity of Religions

In 1846, historian George Grote described the era in which Greek myth and religious practice developed as an “age of historical faith”; he compared the psychological tendencies of that period with “the like mental habit in early modern Europe” (viii). Grote's *History of Greece* implicitly equates classical myths with the legends of the saints and with Arthurian romances (419–37). To Grote, a Benthamite rationalist, Christian and Greek religion were equally based on irrational impulses; for Grote's Protestant readers, it was easy to believe that mediaeval Catholics were stirred by a sincere (but mistaken) religiosity like that of the ancient pagans. Mackay's *The Progress of the Intellect* (1850), though expressing a reverence for religion absent from Grote, similarly declares: “The free fancy that wove the web of Mythus was consecrated by faith” (1: vii). Discussing the Hebrew and Greek religions alternately, Mackay traces the same impulses, errors, and patterns of development in each. He argues that in both religions, an initial intuition of pantheism (informed by the theory of emanation) became degraded through picturesque mythologizing.¹³ The Jews then (through various developments, some of which give rise to Christianity) rediscover a sense of the divine unity, which the Greeks also begin to redevelop, through the Mysteries and the work of the philosophers (2: 110, 125, 146–73).

Going still further, Ruskin in *The Queen of the Air* (1869) sets pagan and Christian religion virtually on a level. He enlarges and transforms the figure of Athena to a pantheistic energy that courses through the heavens, the earth, and the heart. Understood as uniting the highest glories of the classical goddess and the Christian God, she offers a way to imagine and approach the “one continual and omnipotent presence of help, and of peace” (*Queen* 2.100.136). As Dinah Birch observes,

¹³ On emanation theory, see Mackay 2: 12–16; on the development from a “vague sense of Deity” to symbolism and mythology, see 1: 131–44. Mackay repeatedly cites both Creuzer's third edition of the *Symbolik* and Guigniaut's translation of Creuzer.

Ruskin's comparative mythology neither divides the Christian from the pagan, nor implies any denigration of the Christian faith Greek mythology was a religion, and is still a religion, as far as he is concerned; as good a religion as Christianity—indeed, in all essential respects, the same religion as Christianity. ("Ruskin's Solar Mythology" 121)

That leading writers could openly articulate such sentiments—without rousing furious denunciation—suggests a remarkable cultural shift. What makes this degree of change possible over so short a historical period is, I argue, largely the Christianized pantheism or pantheized Christianity of *The Excursion*, which pervades much Victorian mythology.¹⁴

Imagination and Nature

"Mythology is poetry," Mackay asserted (1: 181). Even K.O. Müller in his *History of the Literature of Ancient Greece* (1840) had used Wordsworthian language to describe mythmaking:

Imagination—whose operations are most active, and whose expressions are most simple and natural in the childhood both of nations and individuals—led these early inhabitants to discover, not only in the general phenomena of vegetation, the unfolding and death of the leaf and flower, ... but also in the peculiar physical character of certain districts, a sign of ... certain deities. (qtd in Feldman and Richardson 423)

Perhaps the most famous variation on this theme is Max Müller's theory in *Comparative Mythology* (1856) that myths are tales accounting for metaphors based on solar phenomena; he supports this theory not only by philological argument but also by repeated appeals to Wordsworth. In Müller's view, the primitive mind, perceiving intimations of transcendence in natural phenomena, produced a complex, luminous poetry in language itself: "The creation of every word was originally a poem, embodying a bold metaphor or a bright conception" (101). Later these idioms, really intended to convey religious feelings, became misunderstood, elaborated, and debased into attractive tales—the myths we know (82). Mythology thus proceeds from "a disease of language," in Müller's infamous phrase (qtd in Ackerman 28), and primacy, originary force, is given to the poetic imagination rather than to the mythic perception. Müller advises: "[L]et us look to our poets, who ... use no word without having really enlivened it in their mind, ... and may in this sense be called μυθολογοι [mythologues, those who speak myths] Let us open Wordsworth" (73). And Müller did open Wordsworth, and to some purpose, quoting seven passages within five pages and returning to the poet twice again in the course of *Comparative*

¹⁴ The second volume of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* begins by invoking the very passage from *The Excursion* discussed above (I.i.5, p. 4 and n).

Mythology (73–7, 136, 144). In Müller’s view, Wordsworth’s verse restores us to imaginative perception, to the primacy of metaphor, to language in its healthy state.¹⁵

Grote’s view on the relationship of poetry and mythology is both more complex and more influential: early Greek mythology emerged from a “state of mind . . . analogous to our own childhood,” but in the maturity of classical Greece, he believed, great poets and dramatists acted as religious reformers, revising myths that “had ceased to be in complete harmony even with the lower strata of intellect and sentiment,—much more so with the higher” (Grote 318–19, 338).¹⁶ The poetic impulse therefore came into play twice over—first, naively and unconsciously in the early mythmaking of the folk; again, in a more deliberate and sophisticated way, through the poetry of a high culture. Grote’s analysis may have offered Victorian poets a model for revisionist mythmaking at a time when Christian myth also seemed to require refinement and accommodation—or perhaps Grote, observing this very process in Victorian poetry, projected such developments onto Greek cultural history. (Tennyson in the *Poems* of 1842—notably in “The Lotos-Eaters” and the “Morte d’Arthur,” respectively—had already refined both Greek and Christian myth and legend in just such a way.) This strategy made room for sophisticated modern poets who felt uneasy with a dogmatic orthodoxy. With due delicacy, due respect for readers’ religious sensibilities, poets could critique and modify both classical and Christian faith, and thus spiritually elevate and nurture their own age.

The Contrast of Olympian Worship with the Mysteries

Mythographers at the middle of the nineteenth century seemed often to glorify the Olympian gods of light and of conscious wisdom. K.O. Müller exalts Apollo; Ruskin, Athena; Max Müller, any figure he could possibly view as a solar hero. Yet, as Dinah Birch has shown, both Ruskin and Max Müller predominantly evoke a “shadowed school of light,” a dying god of the sunset (“Solar Mythology” 110, 120). They present the Olympians as complex figures, subtle, dynamic, infused with what Weltman calls “the negative force that loosens the bonds of form and allows one thing to melt into another” (154). As the century wears on, this insistence on a spiritual vision that acknowledged and incorporated pain, loss, and division grows and shifts the emphasis once more away from the gods of light, toward the chthonic deities and the gods of the Mysteries, until even Ruskin turns from Athena to Persephone. In 1875, Ruskin begins his own *Proserpina*, with its plangent undercurrent of mourning for Rose La Touche, who died that year at the age of 25: “I must go out and see and think . . . what becomes of all these fallen

¹⁵ Evangelista declares that “the Romantics are the absent fathers of [Müller’s] theories of language” (115).

¹⁶ See also Grote 340–50; Kissane 9; Turner 88–9, 93, 102. Turner discusses in detail the significance both of Grote’s sophisticated historicist approach “in the spirit of German historicism” (90) and of Grote’s insight into classical Greek efforts at religious reform (93–5).

blossoms, and where my own mountain Cora hides herself in winter; and where her sweet body is laid in its death" (*Proserpina* 1.12.17).¹⁷

The Creuzerian Mackay in *The Progress of the Intellect* provides the most eloquent mid-century assertion of the topos, which contrasts the Homeric theology, to its disadvantage, with the Mysteries.¹⁸ Here, too, we find an undercurrent of mourning, a Victorian sensitivity to pain. Mackay condemns Homer's mythology for "turning religion into the pageant of a carnival" (2: 112); only in "the Boeotian or Hesiodic songs"—which he believes to have emerged from Orphic Mystery cults—does he find antique poetry that confronts "the difficulties and privations of [its] present" and creates "the religious feeling which may teach men to bear the ills of life" (1: 178–9). The "passion" of Dionysos reveals to us the painful truth that "man, like Oedipus, is wounded from his birth; his real elysium can exist only beyond the grave, the abyss of Cora-Proserpina" (2: 137). For a renewal of that hope, and of that sense of divine unity that is the beginning of spirituality, we must turn to the union of Dionysos and Persephone in the sacred marriage (2: 110, 137–9).

Such scorn for the Olympians, such praise for the Mysteries, goes against the wide current on the surface of mid-Victorian culture—the current that most commentators have taken for the whole sea. Feldman and Richardson argue that "the Victorian revaluation of myth" ignored the irrational depths of Greek culture and filtered Greek myth "through a mesh of decorous and sunny gentility" (301). This assumption holds true for popular handbooks like Bulfinch's *Age of Fable* (1855), yet Victorian representations of Greek religion as sunny and lighthearted are frequently charged with an uneasy ambivalence and qualified by acknowledgments of a more sombre streak in pagan spirituality. For example, in "Pagan and Mediaeval Religious Sentiment" (1864), Matthew Arnold described popular paganism (dubiously represented by the hymn to Adonis from the 15th idyll of Theocritus) as a shallow "religion of pleasure" (229), "cheerful, sensuous" (222)—but Arnold contrasted this popular religion with the graver worship of the Mysteries: "Symbolically treated, as the thoughtful man might treat it, *as the Greek mysteries undoubtedly treated it*, this story was capable of a noble and touching application, and could lead the soul to elevating and consoling thoughts" (222; emphasis mine). For Arnold as for Grote, Greek popular religion was elevated by the great poets of the classic era, who had reformed their religion as Arnold attempted to reform his.

¹⁷ On Ruskin's complex understanding of Proserpina, see Birch, *Ruskin's Myths* 172–94, and Weltman 176n25. Cora of course is a version of Kora or Kore, the name by which Persephone was most commonly known among the Greeks.

¹⁸ Mackay divided Greek religion into "the mystic, which may be assumed to be its more *natural* and *original* form, and the *popular artificial* reading which became current in epic poetry" (Mackay 1: viii; my emphasis). To Mackay, Homer is little more than an antique Bulfinch who provides "a convenient and popular summary" of mythology that becomes "the standard of authority and reference" (1: 177). It is worth noting that George Eliot, reviewing *The Progress of the Intellect* in the *Westminster Review* (1851), not only praised the book highly but also pointed out something of Mackay's debt to Creuzer (Eliot 29–30, 37).

The Anti-Olympian Topos in Victorian Poetry

[F]alsch und feig
ist, was dort oben sich freut!

—Richard Wagner, *Das Rheingold* (1851–52) 92¹⁹

It was in Victorian poetry that the emotional associations of Greek mythology were reworked so that the anti-Olympian topos gradually came home to readers, persuaded them, and became a part of their assumptions. Ironically, this development reinforced a wider cultural shift by which the old Wordsworthian anxiety for connection and conciliation was increasingly displaced by anger and contempt—directed first at the Olympians but in the explosive 1860s spilling over onto the Christian deity as well. The Mysteries were no longer viewed as sober, reverent rituals that could develop a spirit of communal sympathy; by the end of the century, instead, the focus turned toward the orgiastic and ecstatic elements of the chthonic rites.

At first, however, poets attacked the Olympians more than they lauded the Mysteries; the attack was moral (as in Warburton's day), but the morality was Romantic. The objection now was less that the Olympians were finite in *form* (and therefore unable to stir us to an apprehension of the infinite) than that they were finite in *sympathy*, even sadistically inclined to take pleasure in the pain of mortals. In "The Lotos-Eaters," Tennyson painted the Olympian gods as smiling "in secret," amused at the agonies of humanity (159). In "The Strayed Reveller" (1849), Matthew Arnold also presented Olympians who see the world's pain without sympathy; against their indifference he set the joys of the Mysteries, and especially the vision of "The desired, the divine, / Beloved Iacchus" (270–81). Again, in Arnold's *Empedocles on Etna* (1852), while Typho groans under the mountain, Zeus relaxes in "awful pleasure bland," and "the soothed Gods smile" (*Poems* II.67, 81); ignoring the Maenads' appeals, young Apollo serenely waits as the knife is whetted for the flaying of Marsyas:

But he turned his beauteous face
Haughtily another way,
From the grassy sun-warmed place
Where in proud repose he lay,
With one arm over his head,
Watching how the whetting sped. (II.159–64)

Such passages drew on the Epicurean vision of the gods, as depicted, for instance, by Lucretius in *De rerum natura* (2: 1–16, 3.18–22); yet the Victorians were making a point utterly opposed to the classical poet's. The Roman materialist argued that pain is produced by the operation of natural law, so it is childish to blame the gods, who are

¹⁹ "False and cowardly [are the gods who] enjoy themselves, there above" (my translation). Wagner completed the libretto of his opera *Das Rheingold* only a year or two after Mackay's *Progress of the Intellect* appeared in 1850, but he composed the music later.

indifferent to human affairs and do not even notice them (6: 58–79). The Victorians (stirred by the revolution in sensibility that produced the abolition of slavery and other compassionate initiatives) were outraged by the very notion of an indifferent deity reveling in his separate felicity, amused by the world's pain. Significant social, psychological, and spiritual tensions underlay this rage at a detached felicity, in both the Romantic and the Victorian eras; but we are concerned here only with the spiritual dimension. Beneath these apparently irrelevant reproaches to gods long out of use, this revulsion at an Epicurean vision that was hardly popular in the high Victorian age stirs an uneasiness that—more deeply than the Higher Criticism, the revelations of geology, the theory of evolution or any other purely intellectual development—undermined Christianity in the nineteenth century.²⁰ As Charles Darwin wrote simply to a friend, “I own I cannot see, as plainly as others do, & as I shd. wish to do, evidence of design & beneficence There seems too much misery in the world” (224). Add to this uneasiness a Wordsworthian ethic that strenuously sacralized sympathy, compassion, and connection, and the dispassionate Olympian serenity begins to seem almost sociopathic.

These tensions exploded in the poetry of 1859 through 1866, alongside controversies over Darwinism and over *Essays and Reviews* (an attempt in 1860 by seven writers, mostly clergymen, to update English Christianity by importing new theological approaches from Germany); together, all these forces shook Victorian Christianity to its foundations. The topical relevance of the anti-Olympian topos was exposed by Algernon Swinburne, the poet who let so many Victorian tigers out of the bag. Swinburne was aware of the delicately sadistic Olympians of Tennyson and Arnold, but he also responded to other influences. In 1861, R.W. Dixon, a member of the Pre-Raphaelite circle to which Swinburne himself belonged, broke with the Romantic view of the Mysteries as edifying ceremonies of consolation and union. In Dixon's “Proserpine” (1861), the Eleusinian rites are primitive and bloody, garish and chthonic. This is the first English poem to identify Proserpine's consort as Dionysos, “Who dies at his own mystery, / Being a god” (Dixon 74).²¹ Swinburne doubtless responded to

²⁰ Howard R. Murphy argues that, while “developments in geology, biology, and Biblical scholarship provided indispensable ammunition once the attack on orthodoxy was underway, . . . they did not generate the attack” on Christianity; rather, the attack rose from a moral revulsion against specific Christian doctrines—the doctrines of the Atonement, Election, Original Sin, and Hell—coupled with the growing conviction that human religion and morality were dynamic and progressive (Murphy 801 and *passim*).

²¹ Dixon's emphasis on Dionysos's “mystery” and his identification of Dionysos as Proserpine's consort suggest that at the very least Dixon (who was a cleric) was aware of German mythology by Creuzer or by Creuzer's successors. It is worth nothing that Creuzer, in Guigniaut's translation, declared that Proserpine is “*tour à tour la soeur, l'épouse et la mere de Dionysus, surtout du Dionysus mystérieux*”—“by turns the sister, the spouse and the mother of Dionysus, especially of the Dionysus of the Mysteries” (767; my translation). Swinburne (who would certainly have used Guigniaut if he had looked into Creuzer at all) echoes this line in “Dolores” (1866), when the speaker addresses his “Lady of Pain” as “my sister, my spouse, and my mother” (151). See also Guigniaut's notes, 1095–6.

Dixon's emphasis on blood, erotics, and death, for the rites in Swinburne's own "At Eleusis" (1866) are nakedly violent (see 205–6).

More important for Swinburne and for the history of the anti-Olympian topos was Victor Hugo's "Le Satyre" (1859), in which the haughty Olympians are arraigned, shamed, and subjugated by the song of a satyr (a figure associated with the Dionysian Mysteries), who asserts that the divine subsists in nature and humanity. Hugo boldly connects the Olympians with the Christian God, calling for the destruction of dogmatic Christianity: "[U]n dieu c'est de la nuit. / Liberté, vie et foi, sur le dogme détruit!"—"a god is a thing of night; liberty, life, and faith [must be founded] on the destruction of dogma!" (Hugo 10: 601; my translation). Swinburne viewed Hugo as a demigod, and "Le Satyre" was a poem that particularly inspired him (Louis, *Swinburne* 107–9).

Yet Swinburne goes further than Hugo. The gods who create, destroy, and torment, "Not knowing in any wise compassion, / Nor holding pity of any worth" (1057–8), are condemned in Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865), but instantly this attack is redirected to a single God, a "supreme evil," invisible and terrible—a blatantly sadic version of the Judeo-Christian deity (1151). The Olympians and the Christian God alike refuse to taste the agonizing draught of time for themselves, Swinburne explains, while forcing it on us; dividing and separating themselves from mortals, they also force division and separation upon us. Victorian outrage at the world's pain, filtered through a passionately religious sensibility, must direct itself at a god, and the transcendent Christian God—omnipotent, omniscient, inhabiting a joyous heaven while permitting so much agony on earth—is arraigned as soon as a poet arrives who is a crusading free-thinker, with enough courage, panache, and lust for combat to cry, "*J'accuse*."

Swinburne's powerful and controversial *Poems and Ballads* (1866) opposes Christianity openly in a volume that valorizes both Eleusinian rites and Priapic orgies; in his indignant review, John Morley memorably labeled the poet "the libidinous laureate of a pack of satyrs," which is to say the singer of the Bacchic or Dionysian Mysteries (29). Swinburne pits a classicist tragic vision against Christianity and opposes to the beautiful Olympians the chthonic deities of the Mysteries. These two themes are elegantly entwined in the "Hymn to Proserpine" (1866), in which a pagan Roman lamenting the triumph of Christianity contrasts the "dead limbs of gibbeted gods" (44) and the pale maiden Mary (75–86) with the vital and beautiful Olympians; yet, admitting that the Olympians were "bitter ... to follow" if "beautiful ... to behold" (8), the speaker turns in the end to Proserpine, the compassionate, all-but-formless "Goddess and maiden and queen" of death who will at last displace and triumph over all other gods (92).

"Hymn to Proserpine" is among the first of many late Victorian poems on the figure of Proserpine or Persephone (Louis, "Proserpine" 313–32, 336–46). In the context of the anti-Olympian topos, the myth of Persephone has extraordinary resonance, for her mother, an Olympian goddess, turns against the Olympians when her daughter is raped and dragged into the underworld with the collusion of Zeus himself. In the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, the goddess in her wrath withdraws "from the assembly of the gods and high Olympus" (92). Swinburne and Tennyson both expand on her absence, turning Demeter's withdrawal into a formal, terribly

significant refusal to break bread with the Olympians. In Swinburne's "At Eleusis," the goddess explains that, on discovering Zeus's guilt, she "set [her] lips against the meat of gods / And drank not neither ate or slept in heaven" (102–3). Revolting against the male gods' homosocial conspiracy, Demeter resorts to a politics of food that at once separates her utterly from the Olympians and avenges her loss. She destroys the crops to starve the gods of their offerings until the Olympians "faint in hollow heaven," their palates and lips unsatisfied (121). The Eleusinian tale of disconnection and reconnection is turned into a tale of disconnection only.

Much later, Tennyson in "Demeter and Persephone" (1889) develops Swinburne's politics of food in a rather different direction:

Then I, Earth-Goddess, cursed the Gods of Heaven.
I would not mingle with their feasts; to me
Their nectar smacked of hemlock on the lips,
Their rich ambrosia tasted aconite.
That man, that only lives and loves an hour,
Seem'd nobler than their hard Eternities. (100–105)

Tennyson imbues the anti-Olympian topos with a visceral revulsion. His Demeter is never truly reconciled with the Olympians: "Yet I, Earth-Goddess, am but ill-content / With them, who still are highest" (126–7). However, the Olympians may be replaced by more merciful gods, and Demeter's new sympathy with mortals adumbrates a greater unity of God and humanity, to be achieved through the evolution of Christianity. Swinburne turns the Mysteries to a mere promise of agricultural fertility and life perfected—and permanently ended—by death ("At Eleusis" 193–219); Tennyson deliberately blurs the Mysteries with Christianity in harvest hymns embodying "The worship which is Love" (146–7). In trying to return to the conciliatory vision of mid-century mythography, however, Tennyson was vainly fighting a rearguard action. It was a Swinburnean vision of disconnection that would inform the mythography of Walter Pater. The cultural impulses so explosively articulated by Swinburne—the celebration of the chthonic deities, the repudiation of the transcendent, the perception of sex and violence as central in the development of religion—were to animate the most influential sectors of *fin-de-siècle* mythography.

***Fin-de-Siècle* Mythography: The Triumph of the Mysteries**

Everywhere ... the focus of attention has shifted from the canonical immortals, of whom the Olympians are typical, to those vaguer, more shifting divinities ... who preside over the cycle of the seasons ... [and] die to rise again.

—Jane Ellen Harrison, "Year-Gods" (1912) 589

By the mid-1870s, interest in the Greek Mystery religions had reached formidable proportions, and increasingly the tone of mythography on this topic became covertly hostile to orthodox Christianity. From 1875 through 1876, Walter Pater produced a series of lectures and essays on the gods of the Mysteries: "The Myth

of Demeter and Persephone,” “A Study of Dionysus,” and “The Bacchanals of Euripides.” After publishing the first two promptly in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1876, Pater intended, it seems, to publish all three in a single volume in 1878 (*Greek Studies* 2). When *Greek Studies* appeared posthumously in 1895, the addition of several other pieces on Greek drama and art somewhat blunted the impact of the essays on the chthonic gods. The original grouping testifies both to the perceived centrality of the Mysteries at this cultural moment and to the influence of Swinburne’s sombre, freethinking vision of Proserpine.²² For Pater, Dionysus and Persephone are both rich with “dark possibilities,” chthonian deities with “an element of sadness” (44); the tale of Persephone especially “is a legend made by and for sorrowful, wistful, anxious people,” and her images “prove that the Romantic spirit was really at work in the minds of Greek artists,” bringing beauty out of pain (111).

Throughout “The Myth of Demeter and Persephone,” Pater invokes the familiar tenets of mid-Victorian mythography only to transform them. Chthonic gods arise from the worship of nature—its “brooding fertility,” “sinister caprices,” and “the sadness which insinuates itself into its languid luxuriance” (98). This nature is far from the benign power celebrated by earlier Romantics.²³ Pater attacks the view that Greek art “dealt exclusively with human nature in its sanity, . . . permitting nothing but an Olympian, though perhaps somewhat wearisome calm” (111); the Olympians now are not idolatrous, “fixed” productions of the fancy, but simply bores. The Eleusinian rites no longer unite celebrants; after two or three pages evoking the beauty and excitement of the Mysteries, Pater adds a little blightinglly:

We have seen such processions; we understand how many different senses, and how lightly, various spectators may put on them; how little definite meaning they may have even for those who officiate in them Susceptibility to the impressions of religious ceremonial must always have varied with the peculiarities of individual temperament, as it varies in our own day; and Eleusis, with its incense and sweet singing, may have been as little interesting to the outward senses of some worshippers there, as the stately and affecting ceremonies of the medieval church to many of its own members. (124)

We are reminded, with cold delicacy, that individuals respond variously, and this diversity precludes that mystical union with other initiates and with the cosmos

²² On echoes of Swinburne in Pater’s “The Myth of Demeter and Persephone,” see Louis, “Proserpine” 313–20.

²³ Significantly, in “Wordsworth” (1874), Pater had just attempted to refigure that poet as a stranger, sadder Romantic who yields us glimpses of an “emanation, a particular spirit” (419), one who can convey the sombre simplicity of “silence [and] darkness, . . . [or even] the abstract expression of desolation in the long white road” (418) and, “above all, that pitiful awe and care for the perishing human clay” (420–21). For Wordsworth, Pater says, the “old dream of the *anima mundi*” is less a philosophy than a “wild light” kindling his most imaginative mood (424–5); to his readers, Wordsworth in turn offers an “initiation” that makes them more discriminating, more perceptive, but grants no revelation (416).

that is so much a part of earlier accounts of the Mysteries. Pater's emphasis on individual response undermines the Wordsworthian aspiration to universal sympathy. "Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions," Pater had written some years earlier, "is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced ..., each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world" (*Renaissance* 187.29–188.2). Pater also shifts the emphasis from religion to religious sensibility, or perhaps only an aesthetic sensibility; the "outward senses" of the truly initiated will respond to the "impressions" of the ceremonial, but as for a "definite meaning," a central vision that will bind the community—there is no such thing. The implication for Christianity is equally devastating, for Pater repeatedly connects the worship of Persephone with Christian worship, as William Shuter has pointed out (415–16). Pater subtly hints that authentic community is impossible in any religion; the Romantic vision of spiritual and emotional consensus is a delusion.

Steven Connor has argued that in Pater's revisions to the essay on Demeter and Persephone, we find not a celebration of progress but a sense of "the irresolvable ambiguity of myth" (33). Certainly, to read Pater after Creuzer, Mackay, Ruskin, or even Nietzsche is to be struck by Pater's evasion of teleology. His history begins when a people poetically translates "certain primitive impressions of the ... natural world" into "the form of an unwritten legend"; poets then take this material and "handle it with a purely literary interest"; abstract thinkers eventually bring the myth "into the ethical phase," in which the deities represent "moral or spiritual conditions" (*Greek Studies* 91). Yet this process seems oddly purposeless. The people, the poets, and the philosophers make and remake the myth, but not as part of a progress to moral clarity. This is mythmaking for mythmaking's sake, a compulsion to articulate our fleeting impressions, the better to feel them "on this short day of frost and sun" (Pater, *Renaissance* 189). "What is there in this phase of ancient religion for us, at the present day?" asks Pater, and answers: a series of impressions, "akin to the influence of cool places, quiet houses, subdued light, tranquillising voices"; "a solemnising power ... for the elevation and purifying of our sentiments"; a revelation of the place "of the poetry of all religions" (*Greek Studies* 151). All religions are valuable for their aesthetic and emotional effect, and it is this effect only that yields the soul an unpretentious refuge, a refreshment, a place of rest. For Pater, religions do not illuminate; they provide an atmosphere—the subdued, sad twilight as the short day wanes and the chill settles.

Does art offer an alternative religion? Could the "poetry" of a religion be, after all, its essence? These are recurrent questions, of course, in the weltering diversity of aestheticisms that enrich and confuse cultural history from the 1840s to the 1880s. Pater does sustain that connection between myth and poetry that operates so vigorously in much of nineteenth-century mythography. Like Grote, he asserted that myths, first created by a "poet-people" (*Greek Studies* 112), are refined and made enduring by the poets: "There were myths which never emerged from that first stage of popular conception, or were absorbed by stronger competitors, because ... they lacked the sacred poet or prophet and were never remodeled by literature" (113). While more recent critics sternly repudiate individual literary treatments of myth as totally alien to the process by which the group mind makes myth, Pater sees

poetic myth-writing as part of the long, seamless process through which the human mind evolves and explores a complex tale of many-leveled meaning. Myth and ritual are complementary parts of this evolution: Pater's emphasis on the gradual development of myth and its interaction with ritual interestingly anticipates what was to come in the 1890s and the early twentieth century. Yet in the absence of a vision to live by, what function can myth or mythopoeic poetry claim? Pater himself declares that he will provide "a total impression" of the myth by arranging such details of it as "may seem likely to increase [readers'] stock of poetical impressions" (82). The reader becomes a consumer of myth, not a mythmaker.

It would seem, then, that the Wordsworthian tradition in mythography has come to a dead end. Yet Pater is only tidying away a vision that radically different movements in thought had already begun to displace. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1870–71), Friedrich Nietzsche provides the most famous formulation of the topos that we have traced through the century, the opposition between Olympian mythology and the Mystery religions. Influentially, Nietzsche shifts the emphasis from the Eleusinian Mysteries toward the Mysteries of Dionysos, which gave birth to Greek tragedy and, Nietzsche insists, to the only true art. For Nietzsche, the Olympian or Apollonian myths of joyous, beautiful gods are a "shining fantasy" created to defend the Greeks from their own vision of the world's horror (30). Through their explorations of "the whole outrageous gamut of nature—delight, grief, knowledge" (35), Dionysian religion and art tear apart the Olympian fantasy: "The muses presiding over the illusory arts paled before an art which enthusiastically told the truth" and broke "the spell of individuation" (97). "A philosophy of wild, naked nature looks with the bold countenance of truth upon the flitting myths of the Homeric world: they pale and tremble before the lightning eye of this goddess, until the mighty fist of the Dionysiac artist forces them into the service of a new divinity" (67). The tragic vision of Dionysiac art "forces us to gaze into the horror of individual existence, yet without being turned to stone by the vision," because it unites us briefly with "the primal Being" (102–3). Less a philosophical tract than a rhapsody, Nietzsche's book is designed, as its author wrote in 1886, "to enlist fellow revelers and to tempt them into secret alleys, onto mysterious dancing grounds" ("A Critical Backward Glance" 6). In its stylistic frenzy, it invites its readers to share the tragic vision and the wild joy, the laughter, the vigour of the satyr dance.

Clearly, then, discourse about myth is no antiquarian project of purely academic interest; it is about how to live and whether life is worth living. As Nietzsche practises it, it is a kind of poetry. Moreover, his vision of classical myth pits the Dionysiac tragic vision against Christianity—implicitly in the original text, very explicitly in his 1886 introduction, "A Critical Backward Glance," which denigrates Christianity for its "furious, vindictive hatred of life" (10). Such bluntness ensured that Nietzsche's work was ignored or reviled even in Germany for half a century; *The Birth of Tragedy* was not translated into English until 1909. Yet Nietzsche directly influenced British mythography at the turn of the century. Pater's sombre vision, focused and directed by the influence of Swinburne's earlier flirtation with nihilism, encourages the decadent pessimism that Nietzsche saw as the mere beginning of wisdom; *fin-de-siècle* mythography and Modernist

literature ultimately then tried to move through this pessimism to a celebration of life, in the spirit of the Dionysian Mysteries.

Nor was it only in these lofty intellectual spheres that the valorization of the Mystery religions prevailed over Homeric theology. Late Victorian culture displayed this tendency in surprising places, from the fine arts to comic opera. In art, increasingly Dionysiac revels proliferated rapidly. The maenads of John Collier (1886); the Bacchantes of Henrietta Rae (1885), Arthur Wardle (1909), and Arthur Hacker (1913); and the innumerable *fin-de-siècle* paintings of classically dressed or nude dancers whirling in an ecstatic ring—all these popularized a headier version of Greece than Wordsworth or Creuzer ever imagined.²⁴ The Eleusinian goddesses also appeared: D.G. Rossetti compulsively painted and repainted Proserpine through the 1870s, and Walter Crane in 1878, Arthur Hacker in 1889, and Frederic Leighton in 1891 all memorably depicted Persephone (Kestner 238–9, 231, 160). More startlingly, in dramatic criticism, the Creuzerian W.F.C. Wigston argued that Shakespeare’s whole corpus formed “a self-planned and self-contained revelation ... connected with the origin and classical source of the Drama in the Mysteries” (xi). On a different level, the Gilbert and Sullivan operas neatly encapsulated the growing emphasis on the Mysteries over the last three decades of the nineteenth century. In Gilbert and Sullivan’s first collaboration, *Thespis: or, The Gods Grown Old* (1871), Jupiter on Mount Olympus is wounded to hear that he barely appears on the modern stage, except in burlesque (18). By the last Gilbert and Sullivan opera, *The Grand Duke* (1896), it had to be acknowledged that to “revive the classic memories of Athens at its best” would involve rites too “risky” for the Victorian stage—namely, dances “Dionysiac or Bacchic— / And the Dithyrambic revels of those undecorous days” (689). For the late Victorian popular audience, it was not the Olympians, not even the stately rites of Eleusis, but the Dionysian revels that most vividly represented Greek culture and religion.

Mythography itself had become popular at the end of the century. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, first published in 1890, sensationally highlighted the chthonic aspects of primitive ritual, the year-kings’ union with the goddesses of earth and death. Frazer reverses the Romantic vision of mid-century mythography. There is indeed a continuity among faiths as he presents them, but instead of urging reverence for all religious impulses, he respects none. His mythopoeic primitives do not respond to the natural world with loving, imaginative awe; rather, they want to control nature, to gain rich crops or successful hunting. Gods and Mysteries alike emerge from this hunger: according to Frazer, the Olympian Demeter is only a personification of the corn (*Spirits of the Corn* 40), the Eleusinian rites “were in their origin nothing more than simple rustic ceremonies designed to make the farmer’s fields to wave with yellow corn” (*Spirits of the Corn* 111), and the Eleusinian sacrament “originated in a simple harvest supper” (*Spirits of*

²⁴ See Kestner 293, 284, 335, 233; Dijkstra 243–8. It was also at this period that Isadora Duncan first brought to England in 1899 and 1900 her explorations of what she identified as the “secret of ecstasy” in Greek movement and pose (qtd in Kurth 58).

the Corn 162). Such “rustic ceremonies” constitute, in Frazer’s view, the core and essence of all religion, and the gods are little more than ceremonial puppets.

Frazer’s innovation is to reframe a whole tradition of chthonian mythography in terms of primal anxieties about food and sex. This approach fleshed out, as one may say, Nietzsche’s visionary perception of the Mysteries as a celebration of life itself. Nietzsche offers a highly spiritual concept of faith in life, a faith to be achieved only by first passing through a tragic vision. Such a concept of faith is very nineteenth-century—and very difficult to connect to primitive humanity. Frazer supplies the missing connective by offering a vision of primitive life in which “what might be called ‘the tragic rhythm’” (Ackerman 62) emerges from the most basic needs and hungers. What Frazer omits, of course, is the spiritual and emotional dimension in primitive religion. A slightly older figure—the first female mythographer in Britain—was to correct this omission.

Jane Ellen Harrison, the leader of the Myth and Ritual School (a group also known as the Cambridge Ritualists), was born in 1850, four years before Frazer, but her most important work combined the best insights of Nietzsche and Frazer in an original and influential synthesis.²⁵ She was from the beginning profoundly religious—and profoundly un-Christian—in her approach to myth.²⁶ Seeing religion as “a vital and tremendous impulse ... hampered and thwarted” by theology, she felt a “deep inward dissatisfaction with Olympian religion”; she preferred “the mystery gods, ... Demeter, Dionysus, the cosmic Eros,” and their “savage disorders” to the “ordered and stately ceremonial” of Olympic rites (*Alpha* 186, 201, 204). Her *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903) and *Themis* (1912) provide the most eloquent and sustained attack on the Olympians in British mythography, at once synthesizing and richly supplementing nineteenth-century arguments.

Like Creuzer, Harrison sees Olympian worship as a transitional stage in Greek religion, “sceptical and moribund already in its very perfection” (*Prolegomena* vii). Worship of the Olympian figures initially rose out of what Harrison calls “eikonism,” the conscious mind’s “attempted expression of the unknown in terms of the known”; this impulse generated mythology, polytheism, and theology (*Alpha* 202). Yet “aneikonism”—an older, more deeply spiritual impulse, the subconscious mind’s response to the unknown *as* unknown—had earlier produced an “imageless worship” of “life principles within the whole of Nature, not impossible, unthinkable, outside creators and rulers” (203–4). Aneikonism tended toward monotheism and pantheism, toward a religion of “fusion, union, emotion, ecstasy”: at Eleusis, “the Marriage and the Birth were the ... acts by which *union with the divine*, the goal of all mystic ceremonial, was at first held to be actually effected” (204, 205; *Prolegomena* 563). Harrison’s stress on union and

²⁵ Ackerman has pointed out that Harrison and Cornford praised Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* (Ackerman 99, 100); Harrison speaks of Nietzsche’s “contrast, beautiful and profoundly true, between the religion and art of Apollo and Dionysos” (Harrison 1907, 445n4). For Harrison’s debt to and critique of Frazer, see Ackerman 83–6.

²⁶ For Harrison’s view that both *The Golden Bough* and her own *Themis* (1912) were effective blows struck against Christianity, see her preface to the second edition of *Themis* (Harrison 1927, viii).

emotion is Romantic, though her agnosticism is late Victorian. Romantic, again, is her view of the Olympians as artificial products of a sophisticated society. She sees them as projections of the developed human psyche and as informed by its individuated separateness. The gods therefore are alienated from the primitive group mind in its ecstasy of connection (*Themis* 476). Above all (as Wordsworth had protested long before), the Olympians are shaped, “distinct, definite” (*Alpha* 202). This very definiteness disconnects them from what is truly divine: the vital energy pervading the human and natural world. The “clear-cut and departmental” gods of Homeric theology “lay no claim to be All in All, nor are they in any sense Creators, sources of life” (*Prolegomena* 649). On the contrary, as Harrison pointed out in *Themis*, the Olympians represent a rejection of the real conditions of life, separated as they are from plant and animal, from the worship of earth, air and sky, and from mortality (*Themis* 447, 450–51, 453–5, 466–8).²⁷

Here Harrison echoes and builds on such poets as Arnold and Swinburne. In words to which Swinburne might happily have subscribed, Harrison declares:

The crowning disability and curse . . . is that the Olympian claims to be *immortal* . . . [T]hat which is life and reality—Change and Movement—the Olympian renounces . . . Together with this conception of a dead and barren immortality there grew up the disastrous notion that between god and man there was a great gulf fixed. (*Themis* 467–8)

As in the poetry of Hugo and Swinburne, the attack on the Olympians implicitly includes a harsh critique of the transcendent Christian God—of any deity who “withdraws himself from man and lives remote, a ‘jealous god’” (469).²⁸ Harrison can embrace only a dynamic deity, a god of this world: “The mystery gods *are* eikonic, caught in lovely human shapes; but they are life-spirits barely held; they shift and change” (205). She sees it as essential that the gods die, are

²⁷ Elsewhere Harrison quotes Ramsay’s *Dictionary of the Bible*, which describes the Olympians as “an idle, superfluous, celestial hierarchy,” and her fellow ritualist Gilbert Murray, who declares, “The Homeric religion is not really a religion at all” (both qtd in *Alpha* 201). At the same time, as critics have pointed out, Harrison resists an ongoing counter-strain in nineteenth-century mythography that argues for the value of the Olympians: Edward Caird’s *The Evolution of Religion* presented Olympian mythology as a civilizing influence; Lewis Richard Farnell’s *The Cults of the Greek States* (1896–1906) argued that the Olympian worship encouraged the growth of civic virtues. (See Weltman 46–7, Turner 129–31, Gregory 112.) In response to such arguments, Harrison makes an unenthusiastic attempt to give some credit to the Olympian worship in *Epilegomena* (1921), 31–4; *Mythology* (1924), 146–7; and the preface to the second edition (1927) of *Themis*, viii. However, the second edition of *Themis* retains the chapter of savage attack on the Olympians discussed below.

²⁸ Harrison was well read in the Victorian poets. In her *Mythology*, the section on Demeter and Kore alone quotes copiously from Swinburne’s “Hymn to Proserpine” and “Garden of Proserpine” (1866) as well as from Arnold and Tennyson (81–8); her earlier *Ancient Art and Ritual* (1913) quotes Swinburne at length (172–3), and *Prolegomena* had included passages drawn, again, from both “Hymn to Proserpine” and “The Garden of Proserpine” (276).

reborn, and die again; the divine can only be truly apprehended as a year-spirit. The slowly growing immanentism that we have traced through the century is at last fully explicit.

Throughout this period, we have seen that the Mysteries are often used to represent what the author thinks religion ought to be, and the Olympian gods to show what it ought not to be; but the ideal of religion varies, and therefore so does the handling of the contrast. Warburton and Faber deplore the immoral behaviour of the disorderly Olympian multitude, preferring the monotheistic vision supposedly offered by the Mysteries. For such Romantics as Wordsworth and Creuzer, the Olympians are disconnected, static products of fancy; the Mysteries are informed by a true imaginative reverence that unites celebrants with one another and with the infinite in nature. Early and High Victorian mythographers and poets absorb much of the Romantic approach, yet infuse their discussions of myth and ritual with a sadder tone, a sharp sensibility to pain, an anger at any deity who might cause pain and death, or be indifferent or immune to it. As this sensibility and anger are slowly turned against Christianity itself, the Olympians are attacked for their separateness from humanity, their lack of sympathetic feeling, and their indifference or cruelty, while the Mysteries are increasingly seen as expressions of human anguish, hunger, or desire—revelations of the sacral within the swift, bloody, and beautiful cycles of natural life. In the end, only the gods that die survive; the imperishable gods are dead.

The history of nineteenth-century mythography has often been represented simplistically as a counter-religious secularization, a progress toward a purely rationalistic consensus. It has been said, for instance, that the Victorians raised mythography “above the polemical level that had characterized previous work (the usual goal of which had been to demonstrate that pagan myth was a distortion of Christianity, or vice versa)” (Holt 527). Alternatively, it has been assumed that myth in the Victorian age was robbed of “much of its seriousness, much of its dignity, ... and many of its deep connections with what Melville called the ‘underformings of the mind’” (Feldman and Richardson 301). Yet close examination of the nineteenth-century scholarship and literature most influential in the creation of new attitudes to myth shows that deep religious impulses animated much of the work. The spirituality that informed late Victorian mythography and mythopoeic poetry in particular was long unrecognized as such, however, because it simply was not Christian. This chapter chronicles a century and more of effort by mythographers and poets, anthropologists and literary critics, engaged in an anguished and passionate debate that mediated the shift from various forms of Christianity to a far greater spiritual diversity.

Chapter 1

A Myth Appropriated: Greek Persephone to Romantic Proserpine

We have seen how nineteenth-century mythographers slowly, after long debate, came to accept the worship and myth of Persephone as religious or spiritual phenomena. In poetry, too, this understanding comes in fits and starts for a long time before it is generally embraced. In English literature particularly, the myth of Demeter and Persephone seems often to be wandering the world in search of its own lost meaning. It is, in fact, a story that pulls in two different directions: toward a sardonic assessment of woman's tragic entrapment in a society dominated by male institutions, and toward a joyous vision of reunion after alienation. The long disappearance of the deeply religious Homeric Hymn and the ascendancy of Ovid's secularized version of the tale produce a literary tradition in which the myth's stature and significance are diminished for many centuries. Chaucer's very Ovidian Proserpyna in *The Merchant's Tale* has nothing of the great goddess about her. It is true that Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* offers an extended allusion to the myth (and perhaps a revision of the myth itself throughout the play) as a masque of regeneration, a winter's tale calling up the possibilities of spring, and yet this mythic dimension of the play seems never to have been widely appreciated until the mid-nineteenth century. Milton in *Paradise Lost* firmly subdues any spiritual energy within the classical myth to the Christian myth that constitutes his plot, and in this he follows the tradition of the *Ovide moralisé*, which had appropriated all the myths of the *Metamorphoses* and allegorized them to Christian ends. It is in the Romantic period, as the sense of what constitutes spiritual experience shifts in the Western world, that the myth assumes new potency, emerging tentatively from under the shadow of its great competitor—the Christian myth of the Passion and Resurrection.

As the tale of Persephone was appropriated by Christianity, so it was also appropriated, from an even earlier date, by an androcentric literary tradition. The Homeric Hymn is a tale primarily of the relationship between the great goddesses, mother and daughter, and secondarily of the tension between female and male: the mother struggles with the father and uncle to determine the daughter's fate; the daughter escapes her rapist-consort for a time, but not altogether. However, in their dealings with the myth, Ovid, Chaucer, and arguably Shakespeare all seem primarily concerned with the relationship between man and woman, whereas in Milton's allusion to Proserpina the underlying concern seems to be the relationship of the soul to Christ. In the Romantic period, Mary Shelley refocuses our attention on the feelings of the great mother and her daughter, and this is the beginning of the slow reappropriation of the myth and its reapplication to female experience and female relationships. This process, too, advances only intermittently, repeatedly

derailed or complicated by the urgency of religious debate in the nineteenth century. (Only in the late twentieth century, with the fresh upsurge of feminism in the 1970s, is the tale of Persephone predominantly used to express women's experiences in contemporary poems, novels, and mixed-genre texts beyond the boundaries of this book.)

A new dimension of the myth's rejuvenation enters in the late Romanticism of the American transcendental movement, when Margaret Fuller begins to establish the figure of Persephone as an entity of independent significance, the embodiment of humanity's intellectual evolution. This perception of the Koré as a dynamic principle is the keynote that, once struck, continues to sound even to the present day. The deity who embodies time and change, not the deity to whom time is subject, seems most stirring to most modern poets.

Women's Distresses, Women's Power: Classical Themes

The story of Persephone is known to us primarily through literature. The Homeric Hymn to Demeter, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti*, Claudian's *De raptu Proserpinae*—these are the best-known classical sources. In discussing any myth, it would of course be misleading to imply that there is a single correct version from which all others deviate; for example, archaeological and written evidence indicates that the myth and rites of Demeter and Persephone varied from shrine to shrine. There was an Eleusis in Alexandria as well as the Eleusis near Athens (with which Western readers are most familiar), and at the Alexandrian Mysteries, a tantric or "erotic drama" was performed that, according to Carl Kerényi, was quite different from the religious epiphany of the Attic Mysteries (Kerényi 119). However, my focus is on literature of the last two centuries, which draws more heavily on classical literature than on archaeology; so, in discussing the classical myth, as opposed to modern revisions of it, I generally refer to the tale as it is presented in the Homeric Hymn, Ovid, and Claudian—the versions that have been most influential so far. Even these sources differ significantly.

The Homeric Hymn to Demeter was lost to the West until 1777, when a fifteenth-century copy was found in a Moscow stable (Richardson 65–6). This anonymous work (Homeric in style, not in authorship) appears to date to the sixth or seventh century BCE—the beginning of the classical era in Ancient Greece. Persephone, gathering flowers, reaches out to seize a particularly marvelous multiflowered narcissus and is snatched away by Hades; Demeter, searching for her daughter, hears from Helios the sun god what has occurred, and then in rage and sorrow lays waste the land, permitting no living thing to grow and refusing to consort with the gods: "Never, she said, would she mount up to fragrant / Olympus nor release the seed from the earth, / until she saw with her eyes her own fair-faced child" (331–3).¹ Demeter's determined conduct forces the gods to give way, but Hades has secretly compelled Persephone to swallow the pomegranate seed, and so she

¹ The Homeric Hymn to Demeter, ed. and trans. Helene P. Foley. All future references to this work are by line number.

must return each winter to the underworld. In the meantime, Persephone enjoys a joyous and tender reunion with her mother, who permits the fields to come to life again and teaches us her sacred mysteries, by which we, like Persephone, may hope for a kind of rebirth or immortality.

As the Homeric Hymn tells the tale, Demeter is the heroine. Her ardent and tender quest for her daughter; her struggle to protect her daughter and her nursling Triptolemus from death; her rage, which finally forces the male Olympians to yield to her—these are the main features of the story. Persephone is at first an eager girl reaching out her hands to gather a flower that seems the very essence of cosmic sexuality, the multitudinous bloom of sensual life (12); she is on the point of sexual maturation, but she finds too late that sex has a less beautiful side as she becomes vulnerable to sexual predation. The cruelty of her rapist Hades, who is also her uncle, is supported by the collusion of her father Zeus, who is enjoying “choice offerings” even as his daughter vainly shrieks to him for help (29, 77–80). The brutality of the male gods is contrasted with the tender connection between the divine mother and daughter. Dragged off by Hades until she lost sight of the sun, Persephone “still hoped / to see her dear mother”; in the Underworld, she is “shy” to the husband beside her and “strongly reluctant / through desire for her mother”; when she returns to life, she and Demeter rush wildly into each other’s arms (35–6, 343–4, 385–9):

Then all day long, their minds at one, they soothed
each other’s heart and soul in many ways,
embracing fondly, and their spirits abandoned grief,
as they gave and received joy between them. (434–7)

As Helene Foley has argued, Persephone’s marriage in the Hymn is “a deceptive and cruel trick foisted by violence on an idyllic mother/daughter relationship” and Demeter’s triumph is to undo some of the damage a male-arranged marriage has done to her relationship with her daughter (Foley 107, 111). Her furious resolution to withhold the fruits of the earth forces Zeus to require Persephone’s return from the underworld, and only a piece of chicanery with the pomegranate seeds prevents the mother’s victory from being total.² The Hymn not only recognizes female rage and female solidarity as potent and vivifying energies but also evokes outrage at the male exploitation of female sexuality and male disruption of the bond between mother and daughter. Further, the Hymn is a religious exploration of death, loss, and the triumph over death and loss—a religious vision expressed in terms of female experience. This sacred poem ends by praising Demeter’s holy Mysteries, which it assures us are essential to our future after death (480–82).

² This reading of the poem is enabled by the developments in social anthropology (and especially by McLennan’s theory of marriage by capture) outlined in Chapter 2. For a full discussion both of this interpretation of the poem and of feminist controversies over the hymn, see Foley 83–169; for a reading that emphasizes the hymn’s accommodation to patriarchal principles rather than its record of resistance to them, see Arthur. Lefkowitz points out how the hymn stresses Persephone’s connections with women and her misery and reluctance as she is carried off (45–6, 49).

By contrast, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, effectively completed by 8 CE, in the early years of the Roman Empire, is "full of gods but empty of reverence" (DeVeau and Getty 11).³ Here the tale of Ceres and Proserpina is presented as the winning poem in a competition between the Muse Calliope and the upstart Pierides that is subsequently reported to Minerva; the layers of narration distance the reader from the story and encourage us to perceive it rather as a work of craft than as a revelation of spiritual truth. The characters, too, are diminished in stature, humanized, and pitiable. Instead of reaching out for the blossom of sensual maturity, Proserpina is stuffing any flower she can reach "into baskets and into the folds of her gown" with "childlike eagerness" (137). Ovid evades any suggestion of maturation or sexual desire on Proserpina's part. Proserpina calls for her mother and drops her flowers, "and she was so young and innocent that even this loss caused her fresh distress" (137); the nymph Cyane tries to bar Pluto's way, but Pluto flings his sceptre into the depths of Cyane's fountain and a road downward opens for him there—this is clearly a symbolic rape. Cyane weeps in her pain and sympathy until she dissolves away entirely. These details in Ovid suggest the loss of identity and of pleasure that women suffer as the result of rape.

Similarly, Ovid presents Ceres's quest as a series of episodes that broaden the scope of the myth in everyday terms and make it applicable to daily life in a patriarchy. The nymphs Cyane and Arethusa, whose experiences parallel in different ways those of Proserpina, show that Proserpina's sufferings represent women's griefs. Ceres also has a series of confrontations with hostile males: an insolent boy whom she turns into a lizard; Ascalaphus, who betrays the fact that Proserpina has eaten the seeds; Jupiter himself, who tells Ceres that the rape is an act of love (*non hoc iniuria factum, / verum amor est*) and that it provides her daughter with a husband of high status (274).⁴ These encounters further suggest that this is a myth about women's distress in a male-dominated world. However, Ovid expresses pity where the Hymn evokes outrage at the wrongs endured by the goddesses, and his Ceres and Persephone have far less power to resist male dominance or to support one another. Ceres herself is made to beg Jove for help rather than compel him as in the Hymn; she is a figure of anguish rather than of potent rage. Ovid laments the effects of male supremacy but takes care not to undermine it.

Still more deeply patriarchal in thought and feeling is Claudian's *De raptu Proserpinae* (c. 400 CE). This incomplete but elaborate poem takes the tale only as far as Ceres's quest for Proserpine. Although the sufferings of mother and daughter are delineated and the selfish disorderliness of Pluto is noted, Jupiter's decision to give Proserpine to Pluto is depicted as a statesmanlike measure to establish order. The goddesses' suffering makes possible the transformation and enrichment of two worlds; it is therefore, in Claudian's view, fully justified. A strong streak of misogyny runs through the poem. Ceres is frequently blamed for leaving Proserpine alone; it is repeatedly stated that young women should stay within the

³ Hinds has argued that Ovid used the Homeric hymn as a source for his version of the myth (56).

⁴ For the episodes of the mocking boy and of Ascalaphus, see ll.451–61, 538–50.

house to avoid injury to their honour. Venus (though acting on Jove's command) is reproached for her deceit and wiliness in luring Proserpine out of doors, tricking her into a vulnerable position. Though Diana and Pallas try to protect Proserpine from Pluto, Jupiter orders them to end their resistance and even conceal the truth from Ceres when she is seeking her daughter. Finally, Ceres's anger is intense but ineffective. The goddesses in this poem have virtually no power and yet are subjected to moralistic attacks rarely leveled at the gods.⁵

Two motifs appear in Claudian, however, that were to influence later literature significantly. Claudian's Proserpine is an artist in textiles; before Venus comes to lure her from the house, Proserpine is working on an astonishing piece of needlework depicting the entire universe—Olympus, the elements, the underworld.⁶ Further, her mere arrival in the underworld not only causes that "pale and bleak" world to "frolicke in triumphant iollity" (2: 513–14) but also creates a glorious transfiguration throughout the human world. "Death stops his progresse ... / Free from contagion healthy Cities are, / Free from the plagues of famine, sicknesse, warre" while "to her Nuptiall bed / The Virgin's brought" (2: 549–59). Claudian's Proserpine embodies a transfigurative energy that makes her a more dynamic figure than her earlier counterparts in literature and anticipates the transfigurative and redemptive Persephone figures of Ezra Pound and H.D. It is notable that the redemption in Claudian is presented in strictly secular terms.

Ovid and Claudian's secular revisions survived to influence the West's understanding of Ceres and Proserpine through the Middle Ages, and for several centuries thereafter; it is Ovid's version (slightly bowdlerized) that forms the basis for the account in *Bulfinch's Mythology* (1855), still a standard handbook today. Yet, through the rituals of the Eleusinian Mysteries, much of the religious vision expressed in the Hymn survived well into the Christian era (to be appropriated and reframed in patriarchal terms within the new religion). It was widely believed that through the Mysteries instituted by Demeter, humans might share in Persephone's reascent from death—in "happiness both here and hereafter" (Kerényi 15). Pindar and Sophocles assert that the Mysteries bring a blessing after death—"life" after death, Sophocles specifies (fr. 837). Cicero, centuries later, "attaches the highest importance to the radiance which Eleusis cast on all life. 'We have been given a reason,' he writes, 'not only to live in joy but also to die with better hope'" (*De legibus* II.xiv.36).⁷ And later still, when a Christian emperor attempted to abolish the rites at Eleusis in 364 CE, the proconsul in Greece "declared that this law

⁵ This misogyny is heightened in Leonard Digges's 1617 translation of *De raptu Proserpinae* into English, which adds such comments as this: "[H]eadlong will of woman, now, in [Proserpine], / Rebellion nourished" (2: 19–20).

⁶ In Digges's translation, the robes she wears have been embroidered with images of people so beautiful, "might Proserpine / Pricke them but tongues, they'd speak and be diuine," "For she could couzen Natures selfe (at will) / With Art" (2: 89–90, 78–9). The tension between art and nature, the emphasis on robes that suggest divinity, and the portrait of Proserpine as a figure capable of creating life all suggest that this translation may have been influenced by Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*.

⁷ These quotations appear in Kerényi 14–15.

would make the life of the Greeks unlivable, if they were prevented from properly observing the most sacred Mysteries, which hold the whole human race together,” and the emperor was persuaded to allow the rites to continue (Kerényi 11–12).

“Herself a fairer Flow’r”: Proserpina in English Literature before 1800

[T]hey look’d as they had heard of a world ransom’d, or one destroy’d ... There might you have beheld one joy crown another, so and in such manner that it seem’d sorrow wept to take leave of them.

—Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale* V.ii.14–15, 43–6

Inevitably, by the Middle Ages, the Mysteries’ promise of immortality had modulated into the Church’s promise of redemption leading to immortality, and Persephone had come to represent the soul seized upon by evil. Somewhat ironically, from the beginning of the fourteenth century on through the Renaissance, the way in which the very secular Ovid was read was heavily influenced by numerous moralizing and allegorizing adaptations, most notably the anonymous *Ovide moralisé* and the *Ovidius Moralizatus* of Petrus Berchorius. In the *Ovide moralisé*, “Ceres looking for Proserpina is the Church seeking to recover the souls of the faithful who have strayed from the fold. Her two torches are the Old and New Testaments; the child who insults her and whom she transforms into a lizard is the Synagogue” (Seznec 93). Interpretations like this were so widespread that they affected even the Quechua drama of seventeenth-century Peru, as El Lunarejo’s play *El rapto de Proserpina y el sueño de Endemión* demonstrates.⁸ In this way a religious significance was restored to the myth, but the tale’s specific relevance to women’s lives was effectively erased. Moreover, once brought into conformity with the dominant theology, the myth became rather pointless. Christian poets eager to write of resurrection could find plenty of material in the Christian mythos; in *Paradise Lost*, as we shall see, John Milton reduces the tale of Proserpina to a beautiful analogy. It is not surprising, therefore, that in English literature before the Romantic era, hardly any major texts focus primarily on the Koré.

Yet this goddess does appear briefly yet memorably in a few works of great importance by Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton; these works offer a variety of paradigms for interpreting the myth and revive at least some of its old significance for women while also developing some fresh perspectives. The tale may be seen as a prophetic affirmation of Christian doctrine, or as a sardonic illumination of the relationship between the sexes, or as the growth of a female power into sexuality and self-knowledge. Perdita’s allusion to Proserpina’s flowers in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* also offers us a model of the linguistic imagination at work, reviving and reconnecting a fragmented world.

The approach of Geoffrey Chaucer in *The Merchant’s Tale* (composed c. 1395) is essentially Ovidian: urbane, humanizing, self-consciously fictive; sardonically sympathetic to women’s plight, and yet unwilling to mount a serious challenge

⁸ For a full discussion of this remarkable work, see Jaye.

to the structures of male power. Chaucer's Proserpyna is the Wife of Bath thinly disguised as a queen of Fayerye. As soon as Pluto and Proserpyna appear in Januarie's garden, Chaucer reminds us that Pluto had "ravysshed" Proserpyna while she was gathering flowers; in their subsequent conversation, the two powers quarrel specifically over Judeo-Christian antifeminism and the woman's status in a particular marriage. Pluto, as a husband, resents May's plan to cuckold her spouse, Januarie; Proserpyna, as a wife, protects May from punishment by giving the faithless wife ("And alle wommen after, for hir sake" [E2267]) the capacity to invent ingenious excuses. Women, Proserpyna promises, will always be able to protect themselves by a ready use of language. Moreover, when Pluto draws on Solomon and other biblical authorities for arguments that women are essentially evil, Proserpyna shows her own verbal skills with a vigorous *ad hominem* argument against Solomon.⁹ Nothing could show more clearly how intertwined the classical and Christian heritage had become than the spectacle of these classical deities bandying scriptural texts.

In this bitterly hilarious tale, the incessant power struggles between male and female reflect little credit on either sex and pervade the supernatural and mortal worlds equally; sympathy is continually baffled as the greed, lust, and lack of scruple on both sides become painfully evident. As in Ovid, however, male supremacy remains an acknowledged fact. By a determined exercise of linguistic brilliance and ingenuity, May and Proserpyna carve out some small place for their self-assertions, yet each remains under the sway of an undesired spouse, in a state of hardening revulsion and resistance.¹⁰

A little more than a century later, an entirely different note is sounded in William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (1610–11). Perdita's famous invocation to Proserpina, at once innocently playful and charged with sexual passion, offers a potent vision of loss and regeneration:

Perdita. O Proserpina,
For the flow'rs now, that, frighted, thou let'st fall
From Dis's waggon! daffodils,
That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty; violets, dim,
But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes,
Or Cytherea's breath; pale primroses,
That die unmarried, ere they can behold
Bright Phoebus in his strength (a malady
Most incident to maids); bold oxlips, and
The crown imperial; lilies of all kinds
(The flow'r-de-luce being one). O, these I lack,
To make you garlands of, and my sweet friend,
To strew him o'er and o'er!

Florizel. What? like a corse?

⁹ E2225–2319; see especially 2230, 2267.

¹⁰ For a fuller analysis of Chaucer's approach, see Harley.

Perdita. No, like a bank, for love to lie and play on;
 Not like a corse; or if—not to be buried,
 But quick and in my arms. (IV.iv.116–32)¹¹

In this passage, Proserpina is associated with a lost loveliness of springtime blossom, recreated in Perdita's language. The flowers Proserpina let fall when Dis carried her off embodied the possibilities of her innocence. These might have included a development into love that would not have been troubled by sexual violence, loss, alienation, and exile. The qualities of the virgin Koré, like those of Perdita herself, might have included the daffodils' eager daring, the violets' subtle sweetness, the primroses' delicate vulnerabilities, and the bold royalty of the oxlips, the crown imperial, and the flower-de-luce. Perdita, robed "most goddess-like" (IV.i.10), lovingly invokes and recreates these possibilities, suggesting a female subjectivity in growth beyond the shadow of male power and rape. Yet Proserpina was carried off by Dis; Perdita's own love is shadowed by the male power of her lover's father, who is spying on her in disguise; Perdita does not know her own royalty or true identity, thanks to the cruelty of her own father; and the flowers she so finely evokes are unavailable. It is too late in the year for daffodils.

Proserpina, then, is here elegiacally associated with a range of lost possibilities. At the same time, we are also reminded that all these possibilities may be reactivated: love destroyed may be requickened. Resurrection is the dominant motif in the last two acts of this play, and Perdita herself seems inspired to the potent boldness of a goddess figure in a fertility ritual: "Methinks I play as I have seen them do / In Whitsun pastorals," she marvels (IV.i.133–4). It is noteworthy too that, although Perdita is primarily concerned with the notion of decking her male lover with these spring flowers, she longs also to adorn her female friends with the same blossoms (IV.i.112–16). Her loving energy directs itself simultaneously, and with equal ease, into heterosexual passion and same-sex friendship; the true climax of the play is neither her union with Florizel nor her reconnection with her father, but rather her reunion with her mother—whom the audience has thought dead, and who comes to life before the audience's eyes. By the end of the play, all tensions between the sexes are resolved, all secrets revealed, and all happy possibilities revived.

Resurrection, fertility, and purity; the reunion of daughter and mother; and the growth of a female power into sexuality and self-knowledge: the themes Shakespeare associates with Proserpina are those that the poetry and fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries predominantly explore. Moreover, Shakespeare here celebrates various forms of art and shows us artistry—linguistic creation—in process. Perdita's adornment in the robe that makes her "goddess-like" (IV.iv.10) and her exposure to Whitsun pastorals or May Day festivals are experiences of art that stimulate her own artistry, enabling her to transcend her usual modesty, to realize her own nature fully, and in so doing to sketch out, unconsciously, the central myth of the play.

¹¹ It has been suggested by several critics that the whole play is informed by the Proserpina myth: for example, Wolf argues that the roles of mother, daughter, and Hecate are shared among Hermione, Perdita, and Paulina, blurring and overlapping so that the underlying unity of the triple goddess is conveyed.

So poets and novelists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries will also use the tale of Proserpina, or Persephone, to explore the nature, powers, and limitations of the mythmaking imagination and of myth itself.

Shakespeare is the first poet to focus on Proserpina's experience rather than on her mother's. (Perdita's mother Hermione is also a Proserpina figure rather than a questing Ceres.) Here, too, Shakespeare astonishingly anticipates—and influences—the poetry of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. John Milton, by contrast, may be seen as conservatively restoring the centrality of Ceres, the Ovidian pathos of Proserpina's flowerlike helplessness, and the Christian tradition of the *Ovide moralisé* in his famous allusion to the myth in *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674). He pauses at the ominous moment when Satan is viewing Eden and Adam and Eve are about to make their appearance: nothing can match Eden's loveliness, says Milton:

Not that fair field
Of *Enna*, where *Proserpin* gath'ring flow'rs
Herself a fairer Flow'r by gloomy *Dis*
Was gather'd, which cost *Ceres* all that pain
To seek her through the world ... (4: 268–72)

The allusion to Proserpina here evidently anticipates Eve's fall later in the poem—Satan, like gloomy *Dis* (Pluto), will enter the “fair field” and make the pure woman his prey, and a loving deity will act “through the world” to redeem her. Christ's Incarnation and Passion, Milton hints, are faintly figured in Ceres' quest, and particularly in the dragging monosyllables of “all that pain.”

From our vantage point in the twenty-first century, we can see that Milton was fighting a rearguard action. The moralized, Christianized Ovid would barely survive the Reformation; his last gasp sounds in Tennyson's late poem “Demeter and Persephone” (1889), itself a desperate attempt to restore the Christian associations of the myth. The original Ovid lasts longer; his childlike and pathetic Proserpine reappears in Romantic literature, as we shall see. So does the Ovidian and Miltonic image of a mother questing painfully for her lost child. But the significance of these figures was to be radically altered in ways that neither Ovid nor Milton could well have conceived.

Nature's Child: Proserpine in Romantic Poetry

On the other side are deities, allied with the earth and dwelling in her dark recesses ... [these deities include] the child, now lost and now recovered by her mother Demeter, *Cora*, the goddess both of flourishing and of decaying Nature.

—K.O. Müller, *History of the Literature of Ancient Greece* (1840)
(Feldman and Richardson 424–5; emphasis Müller's)

The myth of Persephone might especially commend itself to Romantic poets; after all, this goddess is first seen as a child wandering in a beautiful natural landscape (if we view Demeter as the earth goddess, Persephone is literally the

child of nature). An act of oppression by a formidable tyrant (Hades) severs the child from maternal nature, but the relationship is restored by nature's power. Surely this is a quintessentially Romantic plot.

This is, in fact, the interpretation that develops in the few English Romantic texts that address the myth fully. Also infusing these texts is a Shakespearean nostalgia for the lost possibilities of Proserpina's loveliness, innocence, and communion with natural energies—and a Shakespearean conviction that what was lost may be regained and regenerated. We should remember that *The Winter's Tale*, after more than a century of oblivion, returned to the stage gradually in the late eighteenth century; at first it appeared in strikingly revised versions such as McNamara Morgan's *The Sheep-Shearing* (1754) or David Garrick's *Florizel and Perdita* (1756), both of which cut the first half of Shakespeare's play and so heightened the importance of Perdita.¹² Only in the nineteenth century did Shakespeare's version of the play recapture the stage and clearly influence the three closet plays on Proserpine that appeared in the Romantic era.

It may also be significant that the poet and actress Mary Darby Robinson, playing Perdita in 1779, attracted the attention of the Prince of Wales and became his lover (to be ruthlessly abandoned a year later). It is just possible that the old scandal of "Perdita" Robinson may contribute to the unusually sexualized approach taken in *Rape of Proserpine*, published by "Barry Cornwall" (Bryan Waller Procter) in 1820. This version focuses on Proserpine's sexual growth and her ambivalent reaction to the seductions of Hades, presented as a sinister Byronic hero. The main interest of the play lies in the dynamic between these two; Hades initially tries to seduce Proserpine, who is strongly attracted to him; but when she stifles her own desire, he takes her by force. Here Proserpine, like Shakespeare's Perdita, is a pure woman stirred by a natural early sensuality.¹³ Her opening speech, as she gives flowers to her diverse nymphs, is strikingly influenced by *The Winter's Tale*.¹⁴

¹² The play was not performed at all between 1634 and 1741; on the staging of the adaptations and the slow return of Shakespeare's version, see Bartholomeusz 28–63. Both Morgan and Garrick preserve Perdita's speech on the spring flowers, although Garrick cuts out the allusion to Proserpina and Morgan Hermione's return to life, thereby diminishing the resonance of Perdita's regenerative discourse. See Morgan 12 and Garrick 21–2.

¹³ These aspects of Perdita's character were clearly understood as early as Garrick's adaptation, which adds a song for Perdita that includes the lines: "The happiest of folk, are the guiltless and free . . . / When love has possess'd us, that love we reveal; / Like the flocks that we feed [i.e. natural, innocent, and harmless], are the passions we feel; / So harmless and simple we sport, and we play, / And leave to fine folks to deceive and betray" (Garrick 23–4). Similarly, some 60 years after Procter published *The Rape of Proserpine*, Ruskin, analyzing Perdita's invocation to Proserpina, comments that Perdita calls the violet dim "in thinking of her own love, and the hidden passion of it, unspeakable," while the lines on Juno's lids and Cytherea's breath bring in "the two thoughts of softest glance, and softest kiss"; Ruskin's Perdita is suffused with a blameless and lovely sensuality (*Proserpina* 2.1.12, 2.1.45–6).

¹⁴ Cornwall 113–20. *The Winter's Tale* had been performed at Covent Garden in 1819, a year before Procter first published *Rape of Proserpine* (Bartholomeusz 240).

In the same year, Mary Shelley composed a verse play, *Proserpine* (published in an annual, *The Winter's Wreath*, for 1832), that, like *The Winter's Tale*, emphasizes the themes of resurrection and the reunion of mother and daughter. It is possible also that Shelley was influenced directly by the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, which had by this time appeared in several editions and been translated twice into English.¹⁵

In Mary Shelley's *Proserpine*, for the first time since the Hymn, we hear the mother's rage and rebellion against the male powers that have bereaved her of her child (5, 6).¹⁶ The whole text is infused with the importance of a protective and nurturing motherhood. Proserpine opens the play with the cry, "Dear Mother, leave me not!" (5), and Ceres, during her unavoidable absence, commits her child to the care of two surrogate mothers, the nymphs Ino and Eunoe. In the scene of Proserpine's disappearance, Mary Shelley accomplishes what no one else was to achieve or even attempt until Jenny Joseph's *Persephone* (1986): she presents this part of the myth realistically as an account of the emotional dynamic set in motion when a child vanishes. The unconscious Ino returns to the scene talking eagerly to a Proserpine who is no longer there; then, in rapid sequence, come surprise, bewilderment, anxiety, false hopes, sickening disappointment, fear of the returning mother's rage, and the mother's own hasty passage from anger to wild desperation (19–25). This dynamic is re-enacted all too often whenever a child is lost.

When Proserpine returns and is proved to have eaten the pomegranate seeds, Jove orders that the young goddess must never ascend again, but Ceres defies the divine tyrant: "nor Hell, nor Jove," she tells her daughter, "Shall tear thee from thy Mother's clasping arms" (37–8). At last Ceres threatens to go down into hell with her daughter so that "the Earth shall lose / Its proud fertility," and Proserpine's surrogate mothers also eagerly promise to join their beloved child in hell, turning the underworld into a new Enna (38–9). Their resolution forces Jove to change his, and Proserpine's future is divided between hell and earth. Proserpine proclaims this as the triumph of the love between mother and daughter:

Six months together we shall dwell on earth,
Six months in dreams we shall companions be,
Jove's doom is void; we are forever joined. (42)

¹⁵ At least seven editions of the hymn, with or without the other Homeric hymns, had appeared between 1780 and 1807; two English translations of the hymn, based on the first edition (which omits 21 lines), had appeared in 1781 (N.J. Richardson 86, 88). Shelley's husband had a lively interest in the Homeric hymns and translated several of them, although not the Hymn to Demeter; Shelley herself read Latin but only began to study Greek in 1820 (Koszul x), so if she knew the Hymn to Demeter it must have been through a Latin or English translation or with the assistance of her husband or another person who could help her with the Greek text.

¹⁶ By July 1820, Mary Shelley had lost four of her own children, and other children of the Shelley household were lost in different ways, as Claire Tomalin has pointed out (17–18).

Nature's child cannot be wholly alienated from nature and nature's world of feeling, but to say this alone would be to provide an entirely inadequate summary of Mary Shelley's play, which celebrates the very human bond between mother and daughter. Percy Bysshe Shelley contributed to his wife's closet drama two lyrics, "Arethusa" (published in 1824) and "Song of Proserpine" (published as an independent lyric in 1839), the latter of which does shift the focus from the human feelings of Ceres and Proserpine to the gentler relationship between any human and the natural world; the "Sacred Goddess, Mother Earth" is invited to breathe divine influence on her child (*Proserpine* 18). A similar spirit pervades Aubrey de Vere's masque, *The Search after Proserpine* (1843), which by the date is a Victorian text but by the style a late Romantic one. Indeed, one could see *The Search after Proserpine* as a gloss on Wordsworth's statement in *The Excursion* that the classical deities were created by the human imagination out of "observations natural" (708); de Vere spends most of his closet play evoking beautiful Greek landscapes populated by spirits that seem to embody aspects of that natural world.

In this delicate, lavishly embellished poem, as in Mary Shelley's *Proserpine*, the emphasis is on an unusual kind of Romantic quest: Ceres is seen seeking her daughter and begging news from fountain nymphs, fauns and satyrs, and nereids. Proserpine herself is very much a Romantic child, whose innocence transforms her consort—as Hermes insists, describing the goddess as "A child although a Queen; and, though a spouse, / Yet virgin ever; tempering the deep heart / Of Pluto" (27). On her returns to the upper world she will play, being "a child on Earth" as well (35). The concept of Persephone as a winsome child—Anne of Green Gables or Little Lord Fauntleroy—tempering the somber, lonely heart of her autocratic lord reappears in Nathaniel Hawthorne's prose version of the myth, "The Pomegranate-Seeds," in *Tanglewood Tales* (1853), where Proserpina concludes:

"[Pluto] certainly did very wrong to carry me off; but then, as he says, it was but a dismal sort of life for him to live in that great gloomy place all alone; and it has made a wonderful change in his spirits to have a little girl to run up stairs and down. There is some comfort in making him so happy" (206)¹⁷

Hawthorne diminishes, and indeed does his best to destroy, the female anger, pain, and power that give vigour to the myth. Perhaps in some ways the myth fit in too well with the patterns of Romantic thought. The Eleusinian vision of loss and return was drawn from earlier myths of other goddesses (the Sumerian Inanna, the Babylonian Ishtar) who descend into the underworld and return; these earlier myths were intertwined with tales of male death and return (Inanna's lover Dumuzi descends into the underworld and returns periodically, like Persephone, alternating with his sister Geshtinanna; Ishtar descends to recover her lover, Tammuz). The more cryptic relationship between the worship of Persephone and that of Dionysos (who also dies and revives) is obscured by much ancient

¹⁷ On Hawthorne's version of the tale, see Laffrado 75–83.

literature retelling the myths, but it was emphatically proclaimed by certain nineteenth-century mythographers, especially Creuzer, who describe these two deities as “the divine” and Persephone as “by turns the sister, the spouse and the mother of Dionysus” (Creuzer 3.2.466, 767; my translation). The presence of such male cults throughout the ancient world enabled the central Christian concepts of Christ’s Passion, Descent, and Resurrection¹⁸; the Christian understanding of loss and return had in turn been secularized by the Romantics, as M.H. Abrams has argued (12–13, 141–6, and *passim*)¹⁹ and gradually codified in Wordsworth’s epics and epic fragments. Indeed, for some readers, the mere experience of reading Wordsworth could produce a regeneration of both the inner and the outer world comparable (one might suggest) to the revival of the natural world at the return of Persephone. The American William Cullen Bryant “said, that upon opening Wordsworth, a thousand springs seemed to gush up at once in his heart, and the face of nature, of a sudden, to change into a strange freshness and life” (qtd in Abrams 137).²⁰ In such circumstances the myth of Persephone, however apt, had little to add—or so it seemed.

Margaret Fuller and the Transcendentalist Persephone

Yet it was another American, of the New England circle to which Hawthorne belonged, who regenerated the Romantic Proserpine, infusing her with fresh and potent meanings. Margaret Fuller’s organized “conversations” on mythology were generally for women only, but in 1841 she ran an evening series to which men also were invited, and this series was recorded, in “a sort of shorthand,” by Caroline Healey (Healey Dall 10). In the final session, where Fuller also discussed the “spiritual character” of the Dionysian revels, she went beyond the Romantic

¹⁸ Christian humanists such as Hugo Rahner have argued that “Theories which postulate a genetic relationship or one of historical causality between the Hellenistic mystery cults and the essentials of Christian belief can no longer be taken seriously” (9). Rahner argues against both the view that the Mysteries are the source of Christian belief—a view he sees dominating discussions of the problem up to the 1920s, in the works of such writers as Usener, Dieterich, and Reitzenstein—and the view that the Mysteries prefigure Christianity, as certain Catholic theologians such as Odo Casel suggested in the 1930s; he insists rather that Christianity “from the second century A.D. onward” adapted and assimilated “images and gestures from the world of the mystery religions” (11). It is quite clear, however, that Rahner, like everyone else who has approached this subject (including myself), has his own spiritual axe to grind.

¹⁹ Abrams’s vision of this process has been much criticized, and one cannot claim that his volume constitutes an adequate summary of Romantic (let alone post-Romantic) intellectual development; moreover, I argue that he attends too exclusively to the philosophical aspect of the process and too little to its complex relationship with religion and mythology. Yet the value of his study should not be underestimated.

²⁰ For Abrams’s view of how Wordsworth secularizes the Christian vision of loss and regeneration, see 71–140 *passim*.

identification of Ceres and Proserpine with nature and described both as aspects of the same cosmic energy: “Persephone was the hidden energy, the vestal fire, vivifying the universe. Ceres was the productive faculty, external, bounteous. They were two phases of one thing” (160, 159). Persephone now becomes part of a grand Transcendentalist principle informing and animating the natural world.²¹ Nothing could be much further from Hawthorne’s diminished vision of “a little girl to run up stairs and down.”

Fuller’s insistence on a grand, adult Persephone anticipates the strange alteration that comes over poetic renditions of the myth from about 1860 on. She observed that the myth of Persephone “seems to mark the progress of a people from an unconscious to a conscious state (that is, from primitive simplicity to self-awareness); Persephone’s periodical exile shows the impossibility of resuming an unconsciousness from which we have been once aroused, the need thought has, having once felt the influence of the Seasons, to retire into itself” (Healey Dall 41–2).²² James F. Clarke, another participant in the conversation, elaborated: “Persephone was the seed which must return to earth before it could fructify. Thought must retire into itself before it can be regenerate.” Fuller liked this remark, “more especially as in the story of the Goddess it is eating the pomegranate, whose seed is longest in germinating, which dooms her to the realm of Pluto” (Healey Dall 52). Such comments show how Fuller and her friends perceived this goddess as embodying the development from childhood to adulthood, from unthinking physicality to thoughtfulness, both within an individual and within a society; in effect, the Romantic child grows up.

At the simplest level, this represents a profound shift in the focus of the myth from the perspective of Demeter (dominant in almost every version up to 1840) to that of the daughter Persephone; we are dealing now with a rite of passage from innocence to experience. On the other hand, the conversation also shifts the emphasis from Wordsworthian affect toward the condition of the intellect. Further, Fuller and her friends make this myth a tale of the inward processes of the psyche and the organic development of the group mind. In effect, the story of Persephone becomes a tale about how the human mind evolves; it would take only one more step to turn the story into a myth about myth, illuminating the operations of the mythmaking and poetic imagination.²³

²¹ Here Fuller, who admired Creuzer’s *Symbolik und Mythologie* (Capper 301), may be influenced by him in perceiving a mystic, unifying vision beneath the facade of Greek polytheism.

²² It is possible that Fuller here is drawing on Ludwig Preller’s *Demeter und Persephone* (1837), which views the myth of Persephone as developing from an unconscious, ecstatic phase in primitive thought to a more self-conscious allegorical vision, but I have found no evidence that Fuller had read Preller, although Capper presents her as well acquainted with Creuzer and other German scholars (301).

²³ A feminist of our own time has written: “Demeter lost the part of herself associated with fertility, creativity, when her Kore was stolen away” (Hayes 10).

Fuller thus recast the story of Persephone, who in the Ovidian, Miltonic, and Romantic tradition had hitherto been portrayed as a helpless child, portraying her as a paradigm of intellectual maturation. In *The Winter's Tale*, Perdita is just beginning to mature sexually, and though she is brave and articulate, her sensual and intellectual maturation is hardly complete by the end of the play. In Romantic poetry, again, Proserpine's sexual maturation is only incipient even in Procter, and as the goddess becomes a type of the Romantic child, she seems, if anything, to regress in power and stature. By viewing Persephone's story as a rite of passage from innocence to experience, from unconsciousness to consciousness, Fuller suggests a possibility that transforms the whole tradition, going further than the Hymn to Demeter itself had gone. The Hymn does not ask what Persephone might have learned from her experience in the underworld, how she might have changed in personality or understanding on her return to life. Through the late nineteenth century, however, this becomes one of the most pressing issues in the sudden explosion of poetry on Persephone's nature and significance.

The comparatively tidy schema outlined in this chapter was, of course, invisible to most people at the mid-nineteenth century. To consider the reception and reading of the Romantic texts on Proserpine is to see at once how marginalized women's voices remained. P.B. Shelley's lyric additions to his wife's masque appeared independently in his various collected works; Procter and de Vere had a readership, particularly among the Pre-Raphaelite circle. Swinburne thought well enough of Procter to elegize him ("In Memory of Barry Cornwall," 1874); de Vere's *Search after Proserpine* certainly influenced Richard Watson Dixon's "Proserpine" and D.G. Rossetti's sonnet "Proserpina" (which first appeared on his painting *Proserpina* in the 1870s).²⁴ Meanwhile, Mary Shelley's more radical treatment of the myth, published only in ephemeral form during her lifetime, did not appear again in print for 90 years, and to this day it has scarcely received any critical attention.²⁵ As for Fuller, the influence of her *Conversations* is difficult to assess, particularly in Britain.

Yet the availability of the Homeric Hymn had begun to generate a fresh sense of the literary possibilities of the myth by the mid-nineteenth century. The German mythographers were arguing whether the Hymn was sung as a part of the Eleusinian rites, as Creuzer had suggested, or was a mere prize poem as Friedrich Gottlieb Welcker and Preller had argued, or was the work of an initiate composed for celebrations allied with the Mysteries, as K.O. Müller had declared; these very

²⁴ Dixon's lyric climaxes with a song to Proserpine that, like the nymphs' song in *Search*, presents the goddess as "prisoned" in the Underworld, wretchedly "orphaned on [her] throne," longing for the light and for her mother (74). Alicia Craig Faxon suggests that Rossetti's sonnet is inspired both by Swinburne's poems and also by de Vere's *Search after Proserpina*, which Rossetti had read by 1856 (191; Doughty and Wahl, 1: 291).

²⁵ Gubar touches on Shelley's play, arguing that for Mary Shelley and other women poets "the unique biological capacity of women provides a paradigm for nurturing relationships that circumvent the division between self and other, the deathly division at the center of patriarchy" (304).

arguments drew attention to the issue of the Hymn's religious function and purport.²⁶ Keightley's *Mythology of Ancient Greece and Italy* (1831), designed for university students rather than specialists, takes six pages to outline the Homeric Hymn, with several quotations from the Hymn in translation (134–9). At a more popular level, although Lemprière and Bulfinch in their mythological handbooks mainly followed Ovid, Charles Anthon's *Classical Dictionary* of 1841 (reprinted 1862), which "was widely respected and available at mid-century," provides an abridged but "otherwise faithful, and indeed beautiful, translation" of the Hymn under "Ceres" (Hiltner 24; Anthon 329–30). While Anthon tones down the rage of Ceres and the joyous reunion of mother and daughter, and interprets the myth entirely in terms of the natural cycle, he presents both goddesses in rather Transcendentalist terms as almost pantheistic energies: Ceres "was not a personification of the brute matter which composed the earth, but of the passive productive principle supposed to pervade it"; Proserpina was "the personification of the heat or fire supposed to pervade the earth, which was held to be at once the cause and effect of fertility and destruction" (Anthon 331, 1133).

At the same time, Shakespeare's great invocation to Proserpina in *The Winter's Tale* is itself invoked with increasing frequency and reverence as having, beyond its exquisite surface prettiness, a religious resonance. The passage haunts Ruskin, who quotes it and analyzes its imagery in the second volume of *Modern Painters* (2.2.3.7, p. 180), in *The Queen of the Air* (2.82, p. 113), and of course in *Proserpina* (2.1.48.8, p. 192), where Perdita is less a girl than a "mythic [vision] of maiden beauty."²⁷ In the second half of the century, Shakespeare's play, in performance and criticism, was here and there conspicuously connected with pagan fertility rites and with the Mysteries. In 1856, a very Hellenistic production of *The Winter's Tale* at the Princess's Theater ended with "a Sicilian flower festival, appropriate to Persephone" (Bartholomeusz 97); by 1884, a critic could exclaim, "Have we not in this play, and its very title, the Eleusinian Mysteries,—commencing with the lost Persephone and terminating with the revelation of the statue of the earth-mother Ceres?" The same critic, W.F.C. Wigston, even argued that Shakespeare's entire corpus forms "a self-planned and self-contained revelation ... connected with the origin and classical source of the Drama in the Mysteries" (Wigston 25, xi).²⁸ Following Creuzer, Wigston perceives both Persephone and Dionysos as "the creative unity of life itself," "the Kosmic [sic] spirit of the Material world" at once embodied and celebrated in Shakespeare's writings, and especially in *The Winter's Tale* (23, 24–5). A form of Romantic pantheism associated with the

²⁶ See Creuzer 3.1.606–8, 3.3.1099–101. Pater is clearly influenced by K. O. Müller in his suggestion that the hymn "was written, perhaps, for one of those contests which took place on the seventh day of the Eleusinian festival" (*Greek Studies* 82).

²⁷ For the analysis of Perdita's speech in this volume see 2.1.12, p. 170, and 2.1.44, p. 189. In his 1864 lecture, "Of Queens' Gardens," Ruskin lists Perdita among Shakespeare's redemptive heroines (93).

²⁸ On Wigston's debt to Creuzer, see Wigston 7.

Mysteries, therefore, was now circulating in Victorian culture beyond the sphere of scholarly mythography.

When Victorian poets explored the Persephone myth, they already had a rich and confusing variety of traditions on which to draw: the tradition of mythography, the increasingly Creuzerian tradition developing in popularizations of high culture, and the divided tradition of poetry itself. Within the poetry considered in this chapter, as we have seen, Persephone had been chiefly associated with two great issues: the hope of spiritual regeneration and the status and experience of women. Women's struggles and sufferings in a male-dominated society—their position in marriage, their experience of rape, the breaking of the bond between mother and daughter—are, as we have seen, issues crucial in the Homeric Hymn, in Ovid, in Chaucer, and arguably in Shakespeare. They are also problems raised with growing insistence through the Victorian age, from the start of organized feminism in the 1840s to the New Woman controversies of the 1890s. The religious and spiritual concerns raised by the Hymn, Shakespeare, and Milton would seem even more urgent through much of the Victorian age, an era of passionate controversy over the validity and importance of religion.

When Persephone begins to become a powerful presence in mainstream as well as minor Victorian poetry, in the 1860s, the same issues of religion and gender appear—but with a significant difference. For as Christianity comes under attack, and as women writers gain more confidence in expressing female experience (less radically than Mary Shelley but more publicly), the figure of Persephone grows more potent, formidable, and resonant. She is no longer an innocent child, helpless victim of a divine tyrant. Even when she is victimized, she is an adult with her own dangerous power, an experienced woman bearing the burden of a painful revelation; from the *fin de siècle* on, she is increasingly imbued with sexuality or with the fecund strength of her mother. The rich possibilities at which Shakespeare had hinted in *The Winter's Tale* are gradually explored and extended through a century of debate and experiment. At the same time, as Persephone becomes in literature what Fuller had seen in her—an embodiment of the maturing mind of humanity—unexpected and fearful issues arise; a new underworld opens.



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Chapter 2

Marriage by Capture and the Captive Wife in Jean Ingelow and Dora Greenwell

The history of mythography I outlined in the Introduction is primarily a tale of men arguing with one another, and it is incomplete. Through the nineteenth century, few women had the classical education and the status that would have enabled them to engage in the great argument on myth; fewer still were inclined to see classical myth as an urgent issue affecting their own social condition or their intellectual or emotional lives. Yet in both the United States and Britain, we can see, almost from the beginnings of the Victorian period, stirrings and questionings that would later make possible a feminist mythography.¹ In such a context, Persephone has a threefold importance that stems more from her mythos than from her part in the *Mysteries*. She is a goddess, and therefore she embodies a divine female power, yet—raped, compelled into a frightening marriage, divided from her mother and her female companions—she has suffered many of the problems that women may endure in a male-dominated world. Her identity also is mutable, even fragmented, in a way unlike that of any other Greek deity: she begins as a playful child, becomes the alienated and terrifying queen of death, and revives in joy and tenderness for the reunion with her mother every spring. Persephone, in short, is a dynamic figure, illuminating—and perhaps enabling—for women discovering at once their oppression and their potential energies.

Yet to read Persephone in this feminist light requires, of course, the development of basic feminist ideas about the significance of female experience, the nature of sexual oppression, the value of bonds between women, and the flexibility and power of women's characters. In the 1840s and 1850s, social feminism was well under way, but as yet no scholarship existed through which ancient versions of the myths might be seen as fundamentally illuminating the social relationship of women and men. It was in the period from 1861 to 1891 that a handful of male Swiss, British, American, and German scholars sketched out concepts that shed a startlingly new light on the status of women, the nature of marriage, and the mother-daughter bond and therefore encouraged a gender-centred reading of the Persephone myth.

¹ Fiske shows how popular studies of Greek controversies enabled many women to engage with ancient Greek culture. Margaret Fuller's seminars in Boston, discussed in part in my previous chapter, provided a next step for women in New England, while Elizabeth Barrett Browning's lavish use of classical reference in *Aurora Leigh*—often reversing or challenging traditional readings of classical myth—exposes the ways in which mainstream Victorian classicism could be used to mystify gender and suppress female power.

J.J. Bachofen's concept of matriarchy can be seen as both empowering and disempowering to women, and his ideas were certainly used in both ways during the Victorian period. We now understand that it is important to distinguish between *matriarchy* (a society in which women rule), *gylany* (a society without any system of domination based on gender), *matrilinear* systems (in which property passes down through the mother's bloodline), and *matrifocal*—or *matrilocal*—systems (in which the bridegroom goes to live with the bride's family or clan). The existence of matriarchies is now widely doubted, and that of gylanies is still fiercely debated, but the existence of matrilinear and matrifocal systems has been amply demonstrated. Apart from *gylany*, a term coined by Riane Eisler in 1987, such concepts were slowly formed, or rediscovered, through the late nineteenth century by writers such as John McLennan, Lewis Morgan, and Friedrich Engels. (I shall be using twentieth-century terms like *matrilinear* and *matrifocal* anachronistically, at times, as a convenient shorthand for concepts that, being new to the Victorian era, had to be elaborately spelled out by those evolving and popularizing these ideas.) What is crucial is that such concepts were embedded in new views of primitive history and of marriage; the rape of Persephone, or her marriage by capture, could be seen now in terms of the shift to patriarchal and patrifocal systems of power and alliance. The sensed relevance of the myth to modern women still living in a patriarchal and patrifocal system could be understood intellectually within the broad context of an entirely new field—social anthropology.

The Matriarchal Principle

Mystery ... is inherent in the law of Demetrian motherhood, manifested to woman in the transformations of the seed grain and in the reciprocal relation between perishing and coming into being, disclosing death as the indispensable forerunner of higher rebirth ...

—Johann Jakob Bachofen, *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right* 87

It was in 1861 that Johann Jakob Bachofen published his important *Das Mutterrecht*, the first book in modern times to posit a matriarchal state of society that preceded patriarchal rule. Bachofen has been much used, much criticized, and much misunderstood. On one hand, his suggestions have been developed into a stirring mythology of the Golden Age, when the great goddess was worshipped and women ruled (or maintained a nonhierarchical and pacifistic society).² On the other hand, he has also been viewed as an upholder of patriarchal superiority, one of a number of male scholars who in formulating or promulgating the image of a matriarchal goddess served “an agenda which was far from feminist” (Purkiss 33).³ In my view, to ascribe an agenda to Bachofen does him both more and less than justice; in his

² See Eller 150–54 for an overview of this “sacred history.”

³ See also Gadon 226 for a feminist criticism of Bachofen somewhat fuller than Purkiss’.

writings, we find not a linear argument but an ambivalent mixture of nostalgia and fear. What we have in *Das Mutterrecht* is a rich, provocative work, confusing and confused.

Bachofen aspires to establish a model of cultural maturation from uncontrolled sexual indulgence to patriarchal transcendence of sexuality; the matriarchate, as he conceives it, lies midway between these points. Matriarchy is not the earliest form of human culture but the stage at which the “unregulated hetaerism” of earlier societies gives rise to so much “abuse by men” that women demand the “regulated conditions” of marriage and a “purer ethic” (93–4). Within a matrilineal society founded on marriage, women bring about the replacement of nomadic life by agriculture, establish the religious Mysteries, control the family and the state, and guard justice and peace (91, 142, 191). Only this makes possible the transition to patriarchy, “the liberation of the spirit from the manifestations of nature,” and “the sublimation of earthly existence to the purity of the divine father principle” (109, 119). This sounds unambiguous enough. But it is impossible to read Bachofen at length without realizing that his emotional allegiance is to the mother principle and that he sees the originality of his argument as residing in two points: first, that there was a time when women did have political and social control; and, second, that this period was necessary to human development and formed the root of all that he most admires in human culture (69, 79).

Bachofen repeatedly insists that love between a son and a father requires “a far higher degree of moral development than mother love,” precisely because it is less natural and less obviously rooted in material realities. “The relationship which stands at the origin of all culture, of every virtue, of every nobler aspect of existence, is that between mother and child; it operates in a world of violence as the divine principle of love, of union, of peace.” In the matriarchal stage, woman “is the repository of all culture, of all benevolence, of all devotion, of all concern for the living and grief for the dead” (79). Bachofen’s dutiful and Christian insistence on the moral superiority of patriarchy is again and again interrupted, if not subverted, by such rhapsodic tributes to the loveliness of the matriarchy. The matriarchal principle unites all humanity, producing “universal fraternity”—whereas “the paternal principle is inherently restrictive” and divides family from family (80). The matriarchy establishes mystery religions; patriarchal classical Hellenism creates the Olympians and so “may be regarded as a degeneration, as a religious leveling that sacrificed transcendence to immanence and the mysterious obscurity of higher hope to clarity of form”—a point of view strongly reminiscent of Creuzer (87–9). The members of matriarchal society “feel the unity of all life, the harmony of the universe,” “more strongly than later generations” (91). We have already seen that it is just this spiritual vision of cosmic unity that such early nineteenth-century scholars as Creuzer viewed as the ultimate goal of all philosophy and religion.

It should now be clear that Bachofen can be used both by those who celebrate matriarchy and by those who wish to reject it. There is no need to go into his confusing analysis of “Amazonian” society as both an extreme form of matriarchy and a natural outcome of primitive hetaerism or his equally ambivalent representation

of Dionysian religion as “one of the chief causes for the victory of the paternal principle” and yet “the most powerful ally of the hetaeric trend” (100, 105). In Bachofen’s eyes, human development at any stage can slip forward, backward, or sideways. It is almost as if Bachofen projects onto the whole history of myth the struggle of a nineteenth-century son to “grow up,” to honour and identify with his father while still feeling to the full that *Heimweh*, that longing for the eternal feminine, that was so much a part of mid-nineteenth-century culture in the German- and English-speaking world.

For this study it is particularly interesting that Bachofen routinely refers to the matriarchate as “Demetrian” and considers each mother as especially related to Demeter and each daughter as destined to become a mother:

Traced back to the prototype of Demeter, the earthly mother becomes the mortal representative of the primordial tellurian mother, her priestess and hierophant, entrusted with the administration of her mystery Demeter’s exclusive bond with Kore [sic] leads to the no less exclusive relation of succession between mother and daughter (86–7)

It would seem, then, that only the male child can grow beyond the mother’s sphere to the loftier realm of patriarchal morality (although the male also seems in more danger of sliding back to a dangerously unregulated and abusive hetaerism). The female enables patriarchal “civilization” at her own expense and is politically, socially, even spiritually excluded from its privileges. In Bachofen, then, the myth of Demeter and Koré comes to stand at the nexus of immense forces: the struggle toward civilization, which for him as for Sigmund Freud involves the regulation of sexuality (although Bachofen, unlike Freud, considers this a purely benign development); a fertile, terrible tension between male and female aspirations; and the formation of identity and the impetus of cultural evolution. Even heterosexual marriage and the family are revealed as mutable social structures created not by human nature or universal needs but by an amoral power struggle that (in Bachofen’s view) paradoxically furthers the development of morality (by forcing us toward an apprehension of the transcendent).

Perhaps Bachofen’s very ambivalence helps to make his work fruitful and influential. His first disciple was a British scholar, John F. McLennan, a lawyer who had once been a peripheral member of the Pre-Raphaelite circle (by 1855 he had even written *Poems on the Pre-Raphaelite Principle*) (Rivière ix and n10). As Peter Rivière explains, McLennan initiated discussion of such “continuing topics of anthropological concern . . . as marriage forms, incest, exogamy (he coined the word), and totemism” and therefore had a formidable impact on anthropology (vii). Before he actually read Bachofen, McLennan in *Primitive Marriage* (1865) had shocked the scholarly world by arguing “*That the most ancient system in which the idea of blood-relationship was embodied, was a system of kinship through females only*” (64; emphasis in original).⁴ Reading *Das Mutterrecht* later confirmed

⁴ On the impact of the book, see Tylor 81.

McLennan in this conviction (as reading *Primitive Marriage* in 1869 encouraged Bachofen to prepare an expanded second edition of *Das Mutterrecht*), and McLennan devoted the last years of his life to refuting the idea that the patriarchal family “was primeval and universal” (*Patriarchal Theory* 354).⁵

Most significantly for our purposes, McLennan’s emphasis throughout *Primitive Marriage* is on marriage by capture—on cases in which a man either seizes a woman and carries her off to make her his bride by force, or pretends to do so, having previously made a bargain with her relatives. Such practices are, like polygamy and the law of blood feud, produced at the introduction of the patriarchal system (12, 104–5). In critiquing Bachofen later, McLennan insists that a gynocratic or even a merely matrilineal system cannot involve monogamy and must be matrifocal, with “wives not as yet living in their husbands’ houses, but apart from them, in the houses of their own mothers” (*Studies in Ancient History* 419).⁶ Whereas McLennan is wholly uninterested in myth and says nothing of the tale of Persephone, her abduction by Hades would be, to educated Victorians, one of the most familiar examples of marriage by capture. More exactly, to a reader relying on the theories set forth in *Primitive Marriage*, the myth would seem set at the very point of transition, within patriarchal history, between true marriage by capture and contractual marriage, which preserves a ritual element of capture. Persephone and Demeter are taken by surprise—to them the rape is entirely unexpected—but Zeus, Persephone’s father, has colluded in the abduction beforehand. A reader of McLennan’s later response to Bachofen, however, might rather see the myth as marking the point of transition between matriarchy and patriarchy, since Persephone ends by dividing her time between her mother and her husband. In any case, after McLennan, it became easier to see what the poet Jean Ingelow had already partly divined (“Persephone,” 1862): that the myth conveys the nature of patriarchal marriage practices.

Bachofen directly influenced Lewis Morgan’s *Ancient Society* (1877) and, through Morgan, Friedrich Engels’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884). The American ethnologist Morgan respectfully observes, “In a work of vast research, Bachofen has collected and discussed the evidence of female authority (mother-right) and of female rule (gyneocracy)” in Mediterranean and Asian societies; Morgan’s own profound observations on American Aboriginal societies, particularly on the political and lineal system among the Iroquois, strongly supported the view that patriarchal society was neither original nor universal (Morgan 359). In discussing Greek and Roman society, Morgan refers more than once to the “unfavorable influence upon the position of women which was produced by a change of descent from the female line to the male, and by the rise of the [monogamous] family” that isolated the wife from her female kindred, weakened

⁵ For McLennan’s impact on Bachofen, see Campbell’s Introduction to Bachofen (li). McLennan claims that he first heard of Bachofen in 1866 (“Bachofen’s ‘Das Mutterrecht’” 411n).

⁶ Of course, the terms *matrilineal* and *matrifocal* were not yet coined, and I use them because they so neatly encapsulate the very concepts McLennan is painfully recreating.

the maternal bond, and “operated powerfully to lower [the woman’s] position and arrest her progress” (360, 481). While the sacrifices imposed on women, Morgan suggests, may ultimately have produced significant benefits to society, he implies without heat that monogamy “in its highest form” requires “the equality of the sexes” and therefore must continue to develop toward that end (482, 499).

In the fourth edition of *The Origin of the Family* (1891), Engels includes a preface that outlines the history and impact of Bachofen’s ideas. Engels misunderstands *Das Mutterrecht* in some ways⁷ and sharply criticizes its assumption that religious ideas can produce social change; yet he fully endorses Bachofen’s basic attack on the eighteenth-century assumption “that in the beginning of society woman was the slave of man” and Bachofen’s insistence that women once enjoyed a “higher social level” than patriarchy has ever permitted them (Engels 14–17, 60). Indeed, Engels entirely abandons Bachofen’s often strained attempts to justify the patriarchy and presents the creation of the “pairing family” and the new domination of the male as outrageous injustice. “With the pairing family, ... the abduction and barter of women began”; monogamy enters history not “as a reconciliation of man and wife and still less as the highest form of marriage” but rather as “the subjugation of one sex by the other, ... the proclamation of an antagonism between the sexes unknown in all preceding history The first class antagonism appearing in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and wife in monogamy, and the first class oppression with that of the female by the male sex” (59, 79). There is no ambivalence in Engels, who looks forward to “the emancipation of women”; this will be accomplished, he declares, when “the monogamous family” is no longer “the industrial unit of society” (90).

Such a feminist attack on a family structure incorporating “the abduction and barter of women” would certainly enable a sharply focused interpretation of the Persephone myth as exposing not only the dynamics of rape but also the violent basis of patriarchal marriage. Such readings of the myth, we shall see, begin to develop tentatively in Victorian poetry almost concurrently with the publication of Bachofen—not because of his work, perhaps, but in reaction to the same social developments and emotional tensions that inform and inspire *Das Mutterrecht*. It is likely that Bachofen had little direct effect on literature until the 1920s, but he also indirectly affected Nietzsche, and he either influenced or foreshadowed the most significant thinkers on myth in the *fin de siècle*: James Frazer and Jane Harrison.⁸ Bachofen’s conviction that myth faithfully reflects both the social

⁷ For instance, Engels says that Bachofen presents the hetaerist period as “amounting to a complete women’s rule,” whereas in fact Bachofen insists that women would have been sexually abused in the hetaerist period, and it is the subsequent matriarchal period that produces something like a women’s rule. Engels also critiques McLennan but praises Lewis Morgan vigorously (Engels 14, 17–20, 21–6).

⁸ For Bachofen’s impact on the (German) literature of the 1920s and the similarities of his thought with that of Frazer and Harrison, see Campbell, Introduction xxv, liv–lv; for his influence on Nietzsche (via Jakob Buckhardt), see Boas, Preface xx–xxii; for his influence on Freud, see Gadon 226.

realities of ancient life and the “inner truth,” the “fixed laws” of our psychology (73, 76), was already under attack in his own time but is still vividly alive in the work of Freud and of English students of myth at the turn of the century. He moves the interpretation of myth in the direction of gender issues, family dynamics, and the question, What does it mean for a culture, or an individual, to grow up? Must the child grow beyond the mother’s sphere, and, if so, what price is paid and by whom?

These early beginnings of social and cultural anthropology prepare the way for an approach to myth that differs strikingly from that of the early and mid-nineteenth century. The religious value of myth is no longer in doubt to serious students of mythology; but myth and religion alike, at the end of the century, are viewed as expressing, justifying, or responding to social practice—with special stress on the issues connected with the Mystery religions: sexuality, fertility, maternity, and the structure of the family. Indeed, the gradually increasing valorization of the Mysteries through the nineteenth century at once encourages and is potently reinforced by the century’s most important development in mythography: the shift from prioritizing myth (as the origin of ritual worship) to prioritizing ritual (as the origin of myth). A Protestant culture basing its own religious practice on the Scriptures had naturally assumed that sacred stories, in any culture, must precede and inspire sacred practice; as Engels tartly points out (14–16), Bachofen is not free from this assumption. At the end of the century, however, as secularization advances, the question is no longer “How does what people believe condition what they do?” but rather “How does what people do condition what they believe?” In grappling with these issues, English mythography comes of age.

Demeter’s Kisses: Sensuality and the Mother-Daughter Bond in Mid-Victorian Women’s Poetry

Persephone, [seeing] her mother’s [radiant face],
 [left chariot and horses,] and leapt down to run
 [and fall on her neck in passionate embrace].
 Then all day long, their minds at one, they soothed
 each other’s heart and soul in many ways,
 embracing fondly, and their spirits abandoned grief,
 as they gave and received joy between them.
 —Homeric Hymn to Demeter 387–9, 434–7⁹

Because marriage was still the primary role assigned to women, it is not surprising that women’s poems on Persephone in the 1860s and 1870s focus on the way in which women’s experience is structured by marriage. We have already seen that

⁹ The translation is from Foley’s translation in *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (22, 24). Sections in square brackets indicate “reconstructions of the missing text” where there is a tear in the manuscript, as Foley explains (57).

female writers tend to view the myth of Demeter and Persephone as an expression of female experience and specifically as an exploration of the bond between mother and daughter. In 1820, Mary Shelley's *Proserpine* presents the tale as a celebration of mothers' devotion and power (see Chapter 1), but much later in the century, in the United States, Emily Dickinson's friend Helen Hunt Jackson dismisses the myth angrily as a "legend of foul shame to motherhood" (181). No true mother, says Jackson, would alleviate her grief for a lost child by causing other mothers to lose their children, as Demeter does when she creates famine. Rather, the true mother will refrain from letting her own grief shadow others' joy—will veil "the chilly winter in [her] heart" (181). In British women's writing of the mid-century, however, the focus is not on motherhood in general but on a very particular aspect of the mother-daughter relationship: the ways in which that relationship is strained and altered by a daughter's sexual initiation.

The impact of a woman's first marital and sexual relationship—on the woman herself and on her profound and complex emotional bond with her mother—is a topic so intimate, and so delicate, that it could not be discussed explicitly in Victorian literature. Yet classical myth made it possible for writers to approach such issues; it offered a code through which Victorians could represent sexual conduct of all kinds, from same-sex love and orgiastic heterosexuality to incest and rape. As we see in Chapter 4, the tale of Demeter and Persephone was itself to become a useful tool, in novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for examining women's experience of rape, but in the mid-Victorian era, this myth formed instead a splendid vehicle for analyzing the ways in which a daughter's sexual initiation might complicate her connection with her mother.

The popular poet Jean Ingelow first explored this topic. Ingelow's narrative poems, with their haunting refrains and hypnotic aural textures, did much to prepare the public ear for the advent of Pre-Raphaelite literature, and in her lyric "Persephone" (1862), she also pioneered a revisionary yet empathic approach to the goddesses of classical myth. This poem is the earliest I have found that appears, by clear internal evidence, to draw on the Homeric Hymn to Demeter. Ingelow uses the Greek rather than the Latin name of the goddess; she presents the Holy Mother as "raging" at her loss; she uses the Hymn's image of a single "fateful flower" "of rarer growth / Than orchis or anemone"; and she makes explicit what the hymn delicately hints: that Persephone's attraction to the marvelous bloom is what makes her vulnerable to Hades (112–15).¹⁰ Like the Hymn, "Persephone" emphasizes how heterosexual marriage disrupts bonds between women. Ingelow underlines the point that Persephone, for the sake of the fatal daffodil, has left her "fellow-maids" (112, 115), who join at the end of the poem in Demeter's endless mourning.

Ingelow's lyric highlights Persephone's obsession with the daffodil (that is to say, her own youthful sensuality) and her marital status. Marriage appears as a

¹⁰ The crucial nature of the flower is emphasized by the refrains at the end of each stanza, "Persephone, Persephone," alternating with "The daffodil, the daffodil."

rather grim institution into which the woman is tricked by desire and masculine manipulation. Hades appears first symbolically, in the phallic energy with which his “coal-black horses rise”; then he is identified as the power that holds Persephone (113); and we first see him in action when he tricks her into eating the pomegranate seeds, pretending that he offers them as a gesture of love. The emphasis on cold control in his comments as she leaves him encourages the reader to see marriage with an eye of alarm:

‘She will return full soon,’ saith he—
‘My wife, my wife Persephone.’

Low laughs the dark king on his throne—
 ‘I gave her of pomegranate seeds.’ (114; emphasis mine)

As in the *fin-de-siècle* fiction of the American “local colorists,” Persephone’s loss of the “green world” in Victorian women’s poetry suggests the loss of “the green-world bower of the nineteenth-century women’s community” (Donovan 2, 9). Yet Ingelow goes further. It is not only Persephone’s status and relationships that have altered; the goddess herself has changed. For the first time in English poetry, Persephone becomes a goddess of experience, shadowed by her knowledge of the dark.

Calm Queen of Hades, art thou she
 Who stepped so lightly ... ?

The greater soul that draweth thee
 Hath left his shadow plain to see
 On thy fair face, Persephone! (114–5)

Persephone remains a being of flesh and affect: as she returns to the upper world, “Her eyelids droop with light oppressed, ... / Her cheek upon her mother’s breast— / Demeter’s kisses comfort her” (85–8). For the mother, her daughter’s presence gives meaning to the world—“My life, immortal though it be, / Is nought,” she cries, “for want of thee”—and for the daughter, the absence of her mother makes the whole world a lightless “shade of shades” (133–4, 24). Yet the happy reunion of mother and daughter is only temporary, for heterosexual experience, in Ingelow’s view, not only breaks the bonds between women but also radically alters the maiden’s subjective experience of the world.

In “The Garden of Proserpine” (*Carmina Crucis*, 1869), Christina Rossetti’s Anglican feminist friend Dora Greenwell shifts the emphasis further toward Proserpine’s experience of sexuality. Greenwell’s protagonist looks back wistfully to her “ungather’d” bright virginity and has an uneasy, unjoyous “thrill of rapture” in Pluto’s bed of frail blossoms (136–7). This Proserpine suggests the soul’s uncomfortable and yet ecstatic discovery of sensual desire. Where Ingelow’s regular stanzas and obsessive refrains in “Persephone” seem to imply that this development is inevitable, fated—the maiden’s obsession with the daffodil is as

natural as the mother's obsession with the child—in Greenwell's lyric, the shifting metrical patterns and rhyme schemes stress, instead, the painful fact that change has come. Proserpine is at once a "Queen" and a stoic but sorrowing captive, dreaming of Enna.¹¹

When Greenwell revisits the Persephone myth in "Demeter and Cora" (*Camera Obscura*, 1876), the goddess is still more emphatically a "Queen" in "captivity," "bound" by Aïdes's "unwrought chain," surrounded by "bars," and transfigured by her experience of "the girdling night" (14–33). She is a consort, and therefore a wife, and though her situation seems unnatural to her (26), she feels that her link with Aïdes is unbreakable; their bond includes something of a love-hate relationship (15–16), something of an excessive or obsessive love (24–5), something of an unspeakable connection that even "love" could not break: "I leave him not for love, for gold, / One lot we share, one life we know" (39–40). We shall see later that there are hints that this marriage includes, or perhaps was originally based on, the illegitimate but fascinating sensuality of a sexual fall; it is certain that Cora finds in her marriage, for all its indecent beauty and unnatural limitations, access to a power she could not have found elsewhere:

The Lord is he of wealth and rest,
As well as king of death and pain;
He folds me to a kingly breast,
He yields to me a rich domain. (41–4)

Greenwell in this poem returns to Ingelow's concerns: how is the deep and tender love between mother and daughter, the gentle undifferentiated eroticism of that bond, affected by the ambiguous delights of heterosexuality? Greenwell's analysis is now fuller and subtler than Ingelow's, but the parallels between "Persephone" and "Demeter and Cora" are striking. The mother's love for her child is central and reciprocated in both poems; both goddesses are fully developed subjects whose union, achieved or desired, is depicted in terms of a gentle physicality. Greenwell's Demeter yearns for the contact Ingelow's Demeter briefly enjoys: "Oh, that thy kiss upon my cheek / Were warm! thy little hand in mine . . .!" (110–11, ll. 62–3).¹² For Greenwell's Demeter, losing her daughter is reason enough to abandon heaven for earth, and Cora (Kopā = daughter, maiden) thinks wistfully of her mother's domain as her own natural home, "lovely, free and gentle" (31).

Yet Cora now seems committed to her unnatural shadowy lover. When Demeter encourages her daughter to describe the underworld's "flowers, dark, fiery, sweet," Cora replies with sensual intensity:

¹¹ The last two lines of Greenwell's "The Garden of Proserpine" seem deliberately to recall Ingelow: in "Persephone," the goddess "dreams of earthly daylight still, / And murmurs of the daffodil" (113); in Greenwell, she "Dreams of fair Enna's sunlit mead, and yet / Mourns for the fresh, ungather'd daffodil" (137).

¹² Line enumeration is from Leighton and Reynolds 287–9. Future references to this poem will be by line number.

'Oh, mother, they are fair, are fair;
 Large-leaved are they, large-blossomed, frail,
 And beautiful. No vexing gale
 Comes ever nigh them; fed with fire
 They kindle in a torch-light flame
 Half ecstasy, half tender shame
 Of bloom that must so soon expire.
 But, mother, tell me of the wet,
 Cool primrose! of the lilac-bough
 And its warm gust of rapture, met
 In summer days!—art listening yet?
 'Art near me, O my Cora, now?' (65–79)

Cora's highly sensual praise of both Aïdes's garden and Demeter's suggests that, although the daughter's new bond must sever her forever, in one sense, from the mother and from freedom, mother and daughter can still achieve a kind of rapprochement as two women with different yet kindred experiences of sensuality. The description of Cora's underworld garden, with its dark, sweet, frail flowers so alliteratively "fed with fire," faintly suggests the *fleurs du mal* of Baudelaire and Swinburne, but these "large-leaved," "large-blossomed" plants have a generous vitality lacking in the barren beauty of Swinburne's "The Garden of Proserpine." Their passionate feelings—"Half ecstasy, half tender shame"—divert us from the floral metaphor and toward what Greenwell might well posit as the subjective experience of a fallen woman. Cora's insistence that these blooms are "frail" and soon to die reaffirms a traditional association of female beauty and sexuality with the swift mortality of flowers, as in Edmund Waller's "Go, Lovely Rose" or Robert Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time." While the association is usually made to urge women to yield to men's desires, Greenwell's use of it here may celebrate female satisfaction *or* imply that such satisfaction is morally problematic ("frail" may suggest wantonness, sexual frailty).

The contrast between these torchlit, nameless flowers and the "wet, / Cool primrose" at first seems absolute—fiery sensuality that cannot be openly expressed, versus the pure, cool calm of Wordsworthian nature—but the "lilac-bough / And its warm gust of rapture" recall the sweet fragrance and glowing ecstasy of Cora's garden and suggest that Demeter has her own sensuality, though in a different mode. The unnatural stillness of Cora's torchlit flowers, stirred by no "vexing gale," suggests an indoor eroticism fiercely devoted to the moment of desire, whereas the primrose and lilac imply that in Demeter's world, a healthy sensuality is free and spontaneous and includes periods of "coolness"—desire returns seasonally, at its own pace. All this strongly recalls Christina Rossetti's most famous poem, "Goblin Market" (1862), in which a woman falls, through brief sensual ecstasy, into a deathlike state and is redeemed by a loving female relative. In "Goblin Market," the fruit sold by the goblins is the agent and symbol of damaging sensual passion; the juice of the fruit, won by the wiser sister at the risk of her own life and freely imparted to the fallen sister, is the agent and symbol of a redemptive love that includes a healthy sensuous energy. If Greenwell has in effect substituted flowers

for fruit, “Demeter and Cora” explores the feelings leading up to Cora/Laura’s release from the “chain” (25) of Aïdes/the goblins; we are shown the delights of Cora’s fallen state, and we are shown how, understanding that a beloved woman has experienced a parallel “rapture” without the shame and sense of imminent loss that “fallen” passion creates, the fallen woman may begin after all to draw closer to her virtuous mother/sister and therefore move “upward.”

By exploiting the connotations of the underworld and of loaded terms like *frail* and *shame*, Greenwell delicately associates the myth with those stories so beloved of the Victorians: the tale of a fallen woman redeemed by the steady love of a pure woman. Ingelow, on the other hand, presents the bond between Hades and Persephone as strictly marital and therefore irresistible though sombre: “Demeter sighs, but sure ’t is well / The wife should love her destiny” (Ingelow 106–7). Yet both poets explore essentially the same emotional dynamic, and in this they parallel the social anthropologists discussed in the first half of this chapter. Like Bachofen, Morgan, and Engels, Ingelow and Greenwell present a generally positive vision of female connection, though the poets focus on mother and daughter rather than on women who are organizing and leading primitive society. Both the social anthropologists and the poets under discussion show female bonds broken by the violence or cunning of males who find ways to capture or entrap women in marriage. Bachofen and Morgan present the development of patriarchal marriage as necessary to the ultimate progress of society, yet they express distress, or at least a wistful nostalgia, at the price paid; going still further, Engels sees the development of the patriarchal family as the root of social injustice and class oppression. Ingelow and Greenwell stand between the nostalgia of Bachofen and the vehement outrage of Engels: for the women poets, Persephone’s tragedy is a matter of deep sorrow complicated by the Kore’s own ambivalence as she becomes emotionally and sensually attached both to the maternal world of light and to the lord of darkness.

Both poets focus on gardens of desire, the mother-daughter connection, and the ways in which heterosexual experience and marriage in particular interrupt the connection between women. Here, one might suppose, we have the beginnings of a tradition. Yet before the tradition could be said to be established—before Greenwell had published either of her two poems on the Persephone myth—the discussion of this myth had been interrupted, and radically redirected, by a far more flamboyant talent. In the Proserpine poems of Algernon Swinburne, issues of gender are subordinated to issues of spirituality, Christian visions of regeneration to pagan visions of death, and artifices of meaning to revelations of a cosmos that challenges the very concepts of meaning and value.

Chapter 3

Proserpine and Pessimism: Goddesses of Death, Life, and Language from Swinburne to Wharton

Victorian men and women developed radically different visions of Persephone and radically different lyrical traditions centred on this troubled and troubling goddess. As we have just seen, Victorian women like Jean Ingelow and Dora Greenwell emphasize the human dimension of the myth; they explore the relationship between Demeter and Persephone and the strain on the mother-daughter bond following the daughter's marriage and/or sexual initiation.¹ Victorian men approach this figure from a much more otherworldly perspective, emphasizing the theological and philosophical rather than the social resonances of the tale. While in Ingelow and Greenwell Persephone is imprisoned by her relationship to a man, in poetry by Victorian men she is trapped within an "empire of Despair" (de Vere 23), a world of death and darkness. In short, Victorian poetry on Persephone focuses on the love and solidarity between mother and daughter and on death. These are precisely the themes stressed in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, but Victorians separate what the Hymn has put together.

In the nineteenth century, Persephone or Proserpine appears in literature by men chiefly as a token of resurrection or as an embodiment of meaninglessness. She has an important place in two great (and related) debates that were raging through much of the period. First, by mid-century, Christianity itself was reeling under the combined impact of the Higher Criticism, scientific materialism, and a shift in sensibility that made much of Christian belief and practice seem morally inadequate. As the power of Christianity began to wane, many Victorians asked desperately: is death final, or will the Christian promise of resurrection hold good? Second, in the later Victorian era, partly because of this collapse of faith and partly for other reasons (detailed in Appendix A), pessimism gradually became the predominant mood in avant-garde thought, especially (though not exclusively) among men. By the end of the century, British and North American women were responding strongly (if often critically) to this development and to the poetry that urged or resisted a pessimistic vision. As a goddess forced painfully to confront the sombre truths of the underworld, Persephone could easily represent the late Victorian pessimist confronting the agonizing questions: Does life have meaning? Is it worthwhile?

¹ Foley explains how Persephone's abduction becomes "linked in Greek art and poetry with the experience of the Greek bride," whereas the Homeric Hymn to Demeter problematizes Greek marriage customs (81, 80, and n5; see also 104–12).

By invoking or manipulating Persephone, Victorian and Edwardian poets could explore the growing challenge offered by pessimism and argue, sometimes virulently, about the moral implications of mortality, the sanctity or scandal of the material universe, and the possibility of meaning in life or language. Swinburne sets the agenda, demonstrating (and applauding) the threat to Christianity (and to any stable system of meaning) implicit in a pessimist vision. Lewis Morris, George Meredith, and Alfred Tennyson—even Isabella Valancy Crawford in Canada—take up Swinburne’s gauntlet and in widely varying ways attempt to counter his sombre vision through their own revisions of the Persephone myth. Yet in the work of Caroline Fitz Gerald, Mathilde Blind, Marjorie Pickthall (another Canadian), Robert Bridges, and Edith Wharton (an American writer, of course, but an expatriate here responding to a British literary tradition), the solutions of Morris, Meredith, and Tennyson are no longer viable and are barely worthy of consideration; pessimism is a presence that is not to be put by. It remains only to find a way of living with it. As early twentieth-century writers grapple with that question, the issues raised by Ingelow and Greenwell finally resurface: a bewildered Demeter insistently protests the value of life against her daughter’s sophisticated pessimism, and the metaphysical argument becomes a tender, desperate debate—and a symbol of irresolvable stresses within the family.

Swinburne’s Proserpine: The Meaning of Death and the Value of Life

Thrice blessed are those among men who, after beholding [the Eleusinian Mysteries], go down to Hades. Only for them is there life; all the rest will suffer an evil lot.

—Sophocles, *Triptolemos* (qtd in Kerényi 14)

We thank with brief thanksgiving
 Whatever gods may be
 That no life lives for ever;
 That dead men rise up never;
 That even the weariest river
 Winds somewhere safe to sea.

—Swinburne, “The Garden of Proserpine” 1: 171

The Mysteries of Eleusis, which celebrated Demeter and Persephone and may have re-enacted their story, promised eternal life. So did Christianity. In the high Victorian era, as Christianity grew ever more embattled, the prospect of immortality became one of the most emotionally powerful weapons in every Christian’s arsenal. Writers who might have liberal (or at least unorthodox) ideas about Christian theology—Emily Brontë, Tennyson and the Brownings, Dickens, and even Dickinson across the seas—still clung to “The steadfast rock of Immortality” (Brontë 143) with unyielding rigour. To an antitheist like Algernon Swinburne, therefore, it was important to undermine the yearning for immortality, and in his “Hymn to Proserpine” and “The Garden of Proserpine” (1866), he tried to do just that—not by explicitly criticizing the wish for life after death, as many freethinkers

did, but in a more radical and disturbing way, by substituting a different desire: the yearning for death. At the same time, he raises still more complex and fundamental issues. What is it that gives meaning and value to life? If there is no life after death, does life itself not become a mere flicker of swallow's flight, the dance of a midge on a summer's afternoon? Or, worse still, is life the brutish and amoral toil of self-propagation envisioned by Arthur Schopenhauer, a hideous round of pain that should be ended or, at least in some manner, transcended?

We have already seen (in the Introduction) that in his powerful *Poems and Ballads* (1866), Swinburne deploys the anti-Olympian topos to great effect, vigorously challenging Christianity. We have also touched lightly on his vision of Proserpine as a part of the classicist tragic vision he sets against Christianity. Examined in detail, his Proserpine poems repudiate not only the transcendent but also the deeper, more widespread assumption that life *per se* has value—an assumption that is the very basis of the yearning for immortality. Schopenhauer had attacked that assumption and that yearning earlier in the century.² Swinburne did not read German and was not directly acquainted with Schopenhauer's work, but in 1863 he was moved and excited by the account of the philosopher's pessimism in the *Saturday Review*:

[M]ore than theism came under the challenge of [Schopenhauer's] destructive system What, he asks, is the fear of death? Not the result of reflection, for that would imply that life is something precious. It is the blind instinct, the unconscious will to live. If man were only an intelligent being, death would be to him an indifferent, or even a happy event [Schopenhauer] surpasses even Voltaire in denouncing the vanity of optimism. "The world is bad, born brimful of pain and evil" All animal nature is called to witness, by its toils and sufferings, to his merciless thesis, "Optimism refuted by the brutes."

(Rev. of A. Foucher de Careil's *Hegel et Schopenhauer* 325)

Without going deeply into the particulars of Schopenhauer's philosophy, Swinburne seems to have found such passages as this to reinforce his own more Sadean early pessimism.³ He in turn helped to foster the pessimism of the *fin de siècle*, the period

² The influence of Schopenhauer was, of course, only one among many factors in the development of nineteenth-century pessimism, as I explain in Appendix A. I focus on him particularly here, however, because his specific form of pessimism influenced the texts I discuss, especially those of Swinburne and Wharton.

³ Later, in 1869, Swinburne was enthusiastic about Auguste de Gasperini's *La nouvelle allemagne musicale*, which discusses Schopenhauer's ideas at length (Lang 2: 38), and in 1874 he wrote to his publishers, urging them to publish Franz Hueffer's translation of Schopenhauer and referring to Schopenhauer as "the great thinker and man ... whose fame has excited such deep interest and attention in England as well as in France" (Lang 2: 300). Swinburne had known and admired Hueffer since at least 1870 (Lang 2: 131, 140). Apart from these intellectual influences, Swinburne seems to have been drawn to a sombre view of things since the lingering death of his dearest sister (Edith Swinburne was diagnosed with consumption in 1856 and died in 1863) and the disappointment of his romantic hopes in 1864, although his later poetry shows a more hopeful outlook. See Rooksby 81–8, 101–2.

at which Schopenhauer finally became popular in England. And crucial in this process were Swinburne's Proserpine poems, which are closer to Schopenhauer than to Sade in the quality of their pessimism. The universe of the Marquis de Sade is, we may say, bumptiously evil, crammed with extravagant pain and exuberant torturers, and the greatest of these is God; the universe of Schopenhauer—and of the Proserpine poems—is godless, its torment a weary weight sustained by the blind will to live, which we must learn to deny. While Swinburne in his early work more often explores a Sadean attitude,⁴ it is in the Proserpine poems of *Poems and Ballads* (1866)—“At Eleusis,” “Hymn to Proserpine,” and “The Garden of Proserpine”—that he explores a pessimism unalleviated by the sexual delights of pain.

Swinburne's “At Eleusis” is a monologue spoken by Demeter. The text describes Persephone's rape at the hands of Hades but focuses far more on Demeter's grief, wrath, and determination to destroy the earth and starve the gods; at the same time, Demeter tries to give the mortal child Triptolemus immortality, and when she is frustrated, she offers fruitfulness to Triptolemus' land in return for appropriate rites. Swinburne strips the myth of every hint that immortality might be available to mortals. Triptolemus, the goddess's favourite, will grow and die like all other organic beings; the Eleusinian rites involve death (“let sacrifice / Burn and run red”) and are in no way a means to eternal life; in this poem there is not even a foreshadowing of Persephone's return. Demeter's last evocation of her daughter suggests a pale, sorrowful figure, “Sad-tressed,” with “the sorrow in her lips” (*Poems* 1: 214).⁵ Together with the emphasis on the fruitfulness and destructiveness of the earth goddess, this vision of an eternally entrapped Persephone recalls R. W. Dixon's “Proserpine.”

Neither Dixon's “Proserpine” nor Swinburne's “At Eleusis” is pessimistic in the philosophical sense, but both sadly present a death goddess who belongs to the underworld forever. It is in Swinburne's more mature lyrics, “Hymn to Proserpine” and “The Garden of Proserpine,” that he pushes this image toward a genuinely pessimistic and anti-Christian vision, using the figure of the goddess to explore death, language, and the relevance of pagan myth to Christianity. In the “Hymn to Proserpine,” Proserpine is earth's daughter and, like all earth's children, belongs in the dark of earth. As goddess of death, she will overpower all other gods, pagan and Christian alike. Venus and Apollo have perished and the Galilean's kingdom will pass, but the “Goddess and maiden and queen” of the dead will “surely abide in the end” (*Poems* 1: 72, ll.91–4 [line enumeration mine]). And her gifts, the rose-sweet poppies of forgetfulness, are better than art and love and better far than the gifts of Christ and Mary (5–8, 71–90, 97). For only in Proserpine's realm are harmony, calm, and oblivion: “there is no God found stronger than death; and

⁴ For an example of Swinburne's Sadean pessimism, see his 1868 study *William Blake* (158n).

⁵ See Hollander 246–51 for a discussion of how Swinburne revised the account of Persephone's rape in manuscript; see also my “Swinburne on Rape” (58–9), on Swinburne's presentation of Persephone's rape and bondage.

death is a sleep" (110).⁶ This final statement bluntly rejects the Christian doctrine of immortality and even the desire for everlasting life; Swinburne's hymn is an early expression of *fin-de-siècle* nihilism.

In his "Notes on Poems and Reviews" (1866), Swinburne describes his better-known if gentler poem, "The Garden of Proserpine," as a dramatically expressive lyric rather than a philosophical statement, conveying "that brief total pause of passion and of thought" (after "tempestuous pleasures") when "the spirit, without fear or hope of good things or evil, hungers and thirsts only after the perfect sleep" (*Complete Works* 16: 362, 361). The hymn, too, is a dramatic monologue, supposed to be spoken at a particular historical moment "after the proclamation in Rome of the Christian faith" (as Swinburne's subtitle specifies). We therefore cannot say simply that these poems expound pessimism as a philosophical position. But both of these lyrics express the feelings that are generalized, codified, and theoretically validated by a pessimistic philosophy. Both celebrate the finality of death and the calm, pale charm of the goddess who welcomes us to nothingness:

Pale, beyond porch and portal,
Crowned with calm leaves, she stands
Who gathers all things mortal
With cold immortal hands;
Her languid lips are sweeter
Than love's who fears to greet her
To men that mix and meet her
From many times and lands.

She waits for each and other,
She waits for all men born;
Forgets the earth her mother,
The life of fruits and corn

("The Garden of Proserpine," *Poems* 1: 169–72, ll.49–60 [line enumeration mine])

Proserpine's physical presence is very slender both here and in the hymn. The bodily nature of Swinburne's women always tends to dissolve through synecdoche into an impressionistic blur of beauty and—sometimes—energy, but Proserpine is elusive even for one of Swinburne's female figures. In the "Hymn to Proserpine," Venus has raiment, a head, scented hair, a flushed and shining body, and "her foot on the sea" (73, 79, 82, 83–6); Proserpine has only surreal eyes like moons and "the sweet low light of [her] face" (95, 101). That is to say, she does not

⁶ In Swinburne's unfinished novel, *Lesbia Brandon*, much of which was drafted at about the same time as the hymn, the eponymous heroine describes a dream of Proserpine very much like the vision in the poem but more detailed and sensuous and less philosophical: "She stood up to the knees almost in full-blown poppies, single and double. She was not the old Proserpine who comes and goes up and down between Sicily and hell; she had never seen the sun. She was pale and pleased; there was nothing in her like memory or aspiration. The dead element was vital to her" (161–2).

exist below the neck; she is only the “sweet low light” of consciousness freed from the flesh. In “The Garden of Proserpine,” she has “cold immortal hands” to gather “all things mortal”—not merely the flowers, as once in Enna, for in her new realm “flowers are put to scorn” (64); we now are the flowers she gathers, and we are as insignificant as they. The chill of her immortality, in this poem celebrating mortality, contradicts any comforting sense of physicality that the image of the hands might otherwise have supplied. This Proserpine also has pale skin and “languid lips,” suggesting a presence at once delicate and seductive. Two forces are at work here: because Proserpine is the goddess of death, she must of course suggest either a dead body or bodilessness itself, but because she also figures the rejection of life as a value in itself, she represents among other things a rejection of the female body as a vessel of life.⁷

Venus’s “deep hair heavily laden with odour and colour of flowers” embodies the delights of substance, of the “heavily laden” flesh, alive with the flowers and richly sexual. Venus also is procreative; she is “our mother ... and mother of Rome,” the apotheosis both of sex and of triumphant maternity (“Hymn” 82, 78, 80). Proserpine in both poems is the reverse of Venus, of procreation and natural sexuality. She is not a mother, but a daughter who “forgets the earth her mother” (“The Garden of Proserpine” 59) and is increasingly detached from natural cycles and from matter itself. In the hymn, we find two constructions of the feminine—one inextricably involved and identified with the world of the senses and one almost entirely detached from that world. This duality is very common in Victorian literature. Less common is Swinburne’s reason for preferring the pure and bodiless construction of the feminine. He exposes this ideal for the death worship it is; he espouses it because, at this stage in his career, he is a pessimist.

Yet in “The Garden of Proserpine,” the goddess is only one of the innumerable images of oblivion by which Swinburne finally coaxes us out of thought into a still trance, like a foretaste of the “sleep eternal / In an eternal night” with which the poem ends (95–6). As Proserpine represents only nothingness, nirvana, unbeing, Swinburne cannot make her vivid or *actively* powerful (her passive power as the lodestone toward which all life tends is incomparable) without diverting our minds from what she signifies—if “signifies” is the proper word, for, like the other fleeting and overtly inadequate images in “The Garden of Proserpine,” she points to the failure of all signification. All images and signifiers in this poem are “doubtful dreams of dreams” (4), faint figures of the equally fleeting and uncertain things we call material realities or of the still less certain prospect of a better and ideal existence. To challenge the value and significance of life inevitably also calls into question the concept of significance itself and therefore the status

⁷ Only in the rape scene of “At Eleusis” does Swinburne’s Persephone have a “bright body,” “pale maiden flesh,” “reddening feet,” elbows, knees, and hair; after Hades has “Bound her pure body” and taken her underground, she ceases to exist below the neck. In Demeter’s final description of her we hear only of her temples, hair, brows, and lips (*Poems* 1: 210–11, 214).

of language.⁸ “The Garden of Proserpine” is a tour de force, a poem that conceives of and describes nothingness; but in the process, its agnostic use of language seems to imply that words can only be flung at the reality they attempt to describe; they have a distant, arbitrary connection to the things they signify, and they can only evoke—they cannot embody reality or represent in any stable way a reality beyond themselves.⁹ Whether amid the tidal flow of the hymn’s hexameters or the subtler trickle of the trimeters in “The Garden of Proserpine,” the goddess hauntingly evokes the absence of rhythm, the insubstantiality of “meaning,” and the eternal frustrations of language itself.

Yet as we have seen, within the historical context of the debate over immortality and the validity of Christianity, this very pessimism about language and meaning acquires significance and is in fact intensely charged with religious and political importance. The trope highlighted in the title itself recalls the “*Garden of Proserpina*” in Book 2, Canto 7 of Edmund Spenser’s deeply Christian *Faerie Queene*, where the garden represents a temptation to hollow and fatal desires. At one level, Swinburne seems to extend Spenser’s warning, as all “Desires and dreams and powers” become empty and vain in the end (“The Garden of Proserpine” 14); but, because the desire of immortality is one of these pointless yearnings, we can see Swinburne as so often turning a Christian trope against itself, exposing Christianity as a delusory way station on the road to nihilism and the worship of death. The gentle tone and relaxed, musing voice of “The Garden of Proserpine” and the weary, broken lines at the end of the “Hymn to Proserpine” at once disguise and deliver the hardest blow Swinburne can strike at Christianity in 1866.

Victorian Responses from Rossetti to Tennyson: Doubt, Hope, Affirmation

Poems like “The Garden of Proserpine” and “Hymn to Proserpine” prompted John Morley’s infamous declaration (usually quoted only in part) that Swinburne was always either “the vindictive apostle of a *crushing and ironshod despair*, or else ... the libidinous laureate of a pack of satyrs” (29).¹⁰ The first part of this attack is as unfair as the second—for Swinburne, as for Schopenhauer, despair

⁸ For discussion of how nineteenth-century developments in linguistics created a sense of language as treacherous and impermanent—a perception that reinforced a broader pessimism—see Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*.

⁹ Frank M. Turner has suggested that George Grote’s influential *History of Greece* (1846), with its “location of the origin of myth in the functioning of the imagination”—imagination, that is, conceived in an associationist manner, as an emotion-driven process of connecting diverse materials—provided a “useful finite concept of myth and imagination for writers.” Yet this “finite concept of the imagination” (95–6) itself was bound to problematize the status of language in imaginative works, insofar as that language attempts to express philosophical vision as well as feeling.

¹⁰ Morley, however, admits that “Hymn to Proserpine” “contains passages of rare vigour” (27) and quotes from the “Hymn” at length.

liberates; it does not crush—but Morley’s extravagant phrasing shows how a part of the Victorian public reacted to the vision expressed in the Proserpine poems. Other readers responded differently.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s sombre, evocative painting of Proserpine with the pomegranate in her hand (begun as early as 1872)¹¹ may well have been influenced by Swinburne’s poems; in the early 1870s, Rossetti’s friendship with Swinburne was close and strong. In 1872 Rossetti wrote a sonnet in Italian to accompany his painting; in this text and in his English version of the sonnet (“Proserpina,” first published in *Ballads and Sonnets*, 1881), the goddess is alienated and sad. She mourns that the underworld offers only “cold cheer,” “drear / Dire fruit,” and a gloomy atmosphere: “this Tartarean grey / That chills me.” But the key word in the poem, “Afar,” echoes Dixon’s “Proserpine”—yet Rossetti follows Swinburne beyond Dixon’s melancholy toward a more radical alienation from the self.¹² In Rossetti’s sonnet, not only are light, flowers, and the skies of Enna far off, but Proserpina’s future is irrevocably alienated from her past: “afar, how far away, / The nights that shall be from the days that were.” So the goddess is separated from her self, her psyche fragmented, her heart pining after her lost soul (261).¹³ As in Swinburne’s poems, this Proserpina will never leave Hades.

Ruskin, too, after all his earlier celebrations of a very different goddess, in 1875 begins his *Proserpina*, a strange botany handbook with recurrent evocations of a goddess who never emerges from the underworld. Swinburne’s Proserpine poems had made a deep impression on Ruskin, who wrote in a letter, “I’ve got the original MS of the Hymn to Proserpine, and wouldn’t part with it for much more than leaf gold”¹⁴; Ruskin’s own deeply personal vision of the goddess owes much to both Swinburne and Rossetti. “You know that Cora, our Madonna of the flowers, was lost in Sicilian Fields” to an “eternal captivity,” he writes (*Proserpina* 1.3.24, p. 42; 1.5.14, p. 74). Like Rossetti’s, Ruskin’s Cora is imprisoned forever; like Swinburne’s, she figures a death without meaning and without resurrection, a disintegration of the self that Ruskin was himself beginning to experience in

¹¹ This painting had a tortuous history. Rossetti created eight separate versions of it, and he had begun the second by 3 November 1872; three versions he rejected, and two were strikingly accident-prone. The sonnet was not published until 1881, but the Italian version at least was already drafted by November 1872.

¹² The highlighting of the words “Lungi” (“afar,” twice) and “Proserpina” on the Italian version of the poem painted on the 1877 *Proserpine* emphasizes Proserpine’s alienation and distance from life. Faxon suggests that Rossetti is inspired both by Swinburne’s poems and by de Vere’s *Search after Proserpina*, which Rossetti had read by 1856 (Faxon 191; Doughty and Wahl 1: 291).

¹³ My reading of l. 11 may seem odd, but I can only make sense of the sestet by assuming that Proserpine’s heart and soul are both so distanced from her that she can only describe them as “some heart” and “some soul”: “Afar from mine own self I seem ... / And still some heart unto some soul doth pine ... — / ‘Woe’s me for thee, unhappy Pros[er]pine!’”

¹⁴ Letter to Edward Coleridge, 12 September 1866 (Lang 1:184). See Birch on Ruskin’s deeply personal relation to this goddess (173–82).

his repeated breakdowns—"not incognisant, now, of some of the darker realms of Proserpina" (1.11.1, p. 122).

Walter Pater's prose description of the Cnidian Persephone in "The Myth of Demeter and Persephone" (1876) more influentially recalls the objectified and lovely but almost immaterial Proserpine of Swinburne's poems, who embodies change and yet is beyond change herself:

She is compact of sleep, and death, and flowers, but of narcotic flowers especially,—a *revenant*, who in the garden of Aidoneus has eaten of the pomegranate, and bears always the secret of decay in her, of return to the grave, in the mystery of those swallowed seeds; sometimes, in later work, holding in her hand the key of the great prison-house, but which unlocks all secrets also; ... sometimes, like Demeter, the poppy Her shadowy eyes have gazed upon the fainter colouring of the under-world, and the tranquillity, born of it, has 'passed into her face' ... (148–9)

This lady of trance, of secret knowledge and oblivion together, very much the impassive, shadowy Proserpine of *Poems and Ballads*, First Series, and of *Lesbia Brandon*. Yet she is also something more. Pater evokes the haunting presence of Swinburne's death goddess but deftly evades Swinburne's explicit and unpopular antitheism. This Persephone is not merely an end toward which all things draw but a presence containing a promise; her mysteries include not only "the secret of decay" but "all secrets," including, perhaps, the secret of resurrection—the "promise of life to come" (93).

Although Pater is delicately ambivalent where Swinburne seems dogmatic, he returns his readers to the issues Swinburne has raised and to the images Swinburne has presented. For Lewis Morris, in his popular poem *The Epic of Hades* (1876–77), no ambivalence is possible: Persephone's tale includes both the valuable secret of decay, which makes human love possible, and the secret of resurrection, which is the supreme triumph of divine love. His Persephone recapitulates Eve's *felix culpa*; wandering the groves of Hades, she eats a "gold mystic fruit" from a tree, "with a fair seed / Hid in it," and, on eating, she knows "the tree was Life, / And the fruit Death, and the hid seed was Love." Love's "subtle alchemy" transforms Persephone: her primary connection is no longer with her mother, Earth, but with her consort, Death (206–8).¹⁵ Ingelow had described this shift of loyalties in a resigned tone; Morris celebrates it.

For Morris, all growth and passion tend toward their consummation in a heterosexual marriage that both figures and enables the soul's union with God. Mothers should wish exactly this for their children: Morris's Persephone even reflects that she might not have retained Demeter's love if she had "lived to ripe /

¹⁵ Shortly afterward, in 1879, "H.F.," an otherwise unidentifiable resident of Hampstead, used the Proserpine myth to protest urban development on Hampstead Heath, crying, "Pluto's stole [sic] Earth's daughter"—that is, the forces of wealth have robbed the earth of its natural vegetative beauty ("A Lament for the Spoilation [sic] of Wildwood, North End" 207–8).

And wither on the stalk” (209).¹⁶ The essence of physical being lies in the exchange of “virgin freedom” for the “delicious pain” of Love (203–4). Yet this involves a kind of death, a radical alteration of both body and soul. Persephone’s love of death cannot in fact be distinguished from her love of love because love “lives and has its being” in “ceasing and renewal” (209). Through her loving acceptance of death, Persephone becomes the true symbol of the soul’s resurrection at that “last great Spring which brings / New heavens and new earth” (208).

This explicit reference to a Christian apocalypse makes it clear that Lewis Morris opposes Swinburne’s anti-Christian use of the goddess. Certainly Morris viewed with distress the onset of a modern alienation that would leave each psyche “shut fast / In its own jail of . . . solitary pain” (6). In the *Epic* as a whole, he tries to move the reader from a grim, Swinburnean underworld of “ineffable despair” (4) to a more hopeful vision. Further, Morris’s reading of the myth of Persephone depends on the conventional assumption that myths have a lasting, stable meaning based in “the unchanging human heart and soul” (281), and he does not question the stability of semiotic systems as Swinburne does, nor does he reply to Swinburne’s questionings on this point. Altogether, Morris may be taken as representative of those readers who resisted Swinburne’s challenge to Victorian pieties.

By contrast, George Meredith—Swinburne’s friend and fellow radical—fervently resists Swinburne’s semiotics while endorsing his dismissal of immortality. Meredith’s *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth* (1883) were perceived by the *St. James’s Gazette* as presenting a healthy alternative to the “deeply pessimistic note . . . characteristic of much of the poetry that has appeared lately” and by the *Pall Mall Gazette* as restoring “an old aim of the poet, now in some danger of being forgotten, that of celebrating the good which man has in that he simply lives and shares in the seasons.” Both reviews specifically praise “The Day of the Daughter of Hades” (rpt. in Ioan Williams 241, 246),¹⁷ which presents a new addition to the myth in the figure of Skiágeneia (“shade-born”), Persephone’s daughter by Hades. Skiágeneia, forbidden by Hades to visit the living world, has for once hidden herself in her mother’s chariot to see that world in which she can never stay and to which, she knows, she will never return. Her encounter with the mortal singer Callistes is the focus of the poem, but it is not a romantic encounter; Skiágeneia is completely physical (we hear of her throat [Meredith, *Poems* I: 221–38 sec. 6, line 10], hand [sec. 9, line 64], finger, thumb [sec. 6, line 52], eyes [sec. 6, line 70], ear [sec. 7, line 67], face [sec. 8, line 12], “wan smile” [sec. 7, line 110], and “wonderful voice” [sec. 8, line 37]), yet she is not eroticized and bears “Not a sign of the torch in the blood” (sec. 5, line 33). She is simply a celebrant of life—the direct opposite of Swinburne’s Proserpine.

¹⁶ Artemis is made to declare that fealty to herself, and fealty to the “purer, sadder shrine” of Christian virginity, both should “cease / When Love . . . [wakes] / The slumbering soul” (243).

¹⁷ Specific comments on “The Day of the Daughter of Hades” appear on 244, 246.

As he sees her delight in every living thing, as he hears her powerful song “of the rapture of Breath” (sec. 8, line 40), Callistes gradually realizes that the life about him and the daily toil of farmers are sacred, and this realization is nourishing: “the milky kernel of life ... / The song did give him to eat” (sec. 8, line 59, 61). Yet this eucharistic chant is only “a Song of Days, / Where the husbandman’s *toil and strife* / Little varies to *strife and toil*” (sec. 8, lines 56–8, emphasis mine). Meredith’s antimetabole glorifies the energy and appetite that propel such unceasing labour. (By contrast, Swinburne in “The Garden of Proserpine” presents a speaker alien from “reaping folk and sowing” [6] and elsewhere uses antimetabole to suggest the pointlessness of ordinary human labour “While *day sows night* and *night sows day* for seed” [“On the Cliffs” *Poems* 3: 315, emphasis mine].)¹⁸ The driving, erratic anapestic trimeters of Meredith’s poem (very different from the languid iambic trimeters of Swinburne’s “The Garden of Proserpine”) both celebrate and enact the joyous energies of a rapidly changing world. Skiágeneia’s fate is that of all humans. She embodies the religion of Nature that Meredith everywhere affirms: the brevity of our life, the inevitability and finality of death, and the holiness of that which we can enjoy for so short a time.

Yet when Hades snatches his daughter back as he snatched her mother, Callistes grows obsessed not with the truths Skiágeneia has taught him—though he has absorbed them and recounts them in his own songs—but with Skiágeneia herself; he withers away, yearning “to join her, or have her brought back” (sec. 12, line 81). In him we may see perhaps Meredith’s gentle criticism of such poets as Tennyson, who instead of celebrating the holy material world sought ways to transcend it, to save the human spirit from the certainty of extinction. Callistes may also reflect Swinburne’s early pursuit of the death goddess.¹⁹ Callistes takes Skiágeneia “For his beacon where beam there is none”; Swinburne had imagined the “sweet low light” of Persephone’s face where he knew there was only “eternal night” (“Day of the Daughter of Hades,” sec. 12, line 80; “Hymn to Proserpine,” 101; “Garden of Proserpine,” 96). Swinburne sang in “The Garden of Proserpine” of those “Pale” shades of men who, with strength lost and beauty clouded, now drink Proserpine’s “deadly wine” and slumber in her “fruitless fields of corn”; Callistes tries to sing of the Homeric heroes but sees in Skiágeneia’s eyes that they are now “lost-to-light ghosts grey-mailed,” mere shapes of “grey river-mist” (“The Garden of Proserpine,” 31–48; “Day of the Daughter of Hades,” sec. 12, lines 99–105.) Skiágeneia feeds him on the “milky kernel” of her wholesome song instead of the poisoned “hydromel” of Homeric verse (sec. 7, line 88) or the “deadly wine” of Proserpine’s silence.

The contrast between the juicy solidity of a kernel and the unsustaining liquid beauty of the hydromel and “deadly wine” is crucial. For Meredith, “song” must be

¹⁸ On Swinburne’s use of antimetabole, see Louis, *Swinburne and His Gods* 30, 59, 85, 92, 134–5, 172, and especially 130.

¹⁹ In his novel *Beauchamp’s Career*, Meredith presents a hero in whom Swinburnean vitality, courage, and political radicalism are all frustrated by a self-destructive quixotism; Beauchamp drowns at the end of the novel while trying to save a child.

quintessentially substantial, material—as indeed it is; the breath and the swelling and fading of sound waves are physical phenomena. To rejoice in such things is to rejoice in the material world. As Skiágeneia sings “of the rapture of Breath” (sec. 8, line 40), so Meredith’s own lyric verse chirrup and buzzes with animal life—bees, birds, goats, sheep, lizards, snakes—and bursts with vegetable life too—crocus, asphodel, narcissus, hyacinth, “the shade-loved white windflower,” poplar, cypress, pine, “Pear, apple, almond, plum” (sec. 6, line 32, 27–31, 50; sec. 7, lines 1–11, 19; sec. 8, line 33). His song and his heroine’s embody nature’s own “language of primal, untutored immediacy.”²⁰ The sacred truth of the world is within our grasp, in “Corn, wine, fruit, oil” with “the meaning known to men” (sec. 6, line 55). Even the power of death is conceived not as an undoing, a vanishing and a fleeting, but as a desperate appetite for the love and food we live by. Hades bursts up from the underworld calling for his daughter; his steeds rush at the land “Like the teeth of the famished at meat” (sec. 10, lines 40, 46–7). Death itself, then, reinforces the values of life, whereas in Swinburne’s early work, death subverts all human value. The work of physically nourishing ourselves, which Swinburne wearily dismisses in “The Garden of Proserpine,” forms a continual sacrament in Meredith’s poem (sec. 8, lines 40–61); the labour of life that Schopenhauer scorns is the chief joy of death’s daughter in Meredith (sec. 6, lines 43–60). Enough for her to say with her last smile, “I have breathed: I have gazed: I have been” (sec. 10, line 17). The perfect tense announces a perfected life.

Like Meredith, the Canadian Isabella Valancy Crawford pits nature against nihilism, but in *Malcolm’s Katie* (1884), her epic poem of love on the frontier, she challenges philosophical pessimism even more directly than Meredith had the year before. Crawford thoroughly understands the Schopenhauerian implications of Swinburne’s goddess but expounds Schopenhauer’s philosophy through a mouthpiece who is meant to be rejected. Her cynical and pessimistic villain, Alfred, anticipates leaping to the embrace of:

the blank-eye’d queen whose wassail bowl
Is brimm’d from Lethe, and whose porch is red
With poppies, as it waits the panting soul—
She, she alone is great! No scepter’d slave
Bowling to blind, creative giants, she;
No forces seize her in their strong, mad hands,
Nor say, ‘Do this—be that!’ Were there a God,
His only mocker, she, great Nothingness!
And to her, close of kin, yet lover too,
Flies this large nothing that we call the soul.
(*The Collected Poems of Isabella Valancy Crawford* 228–9)²¹

²⁰ Shaw (in “The Agnostic Imagination”) uses this phrase without reference to Meredith (118).

²¹ The volume in which *Malcolm’s Katie* first appeared was well reviewed but “attracted but little general interest” (Wetherald 2).

Through the “blank-ey’d queen,” Alfred insists, the soul can escape the “blind, creative giants” of death, life, and matter, in whom works the imperious will to live; through Proserpine’s “great Nothingness” alone can the soul find freedom. Yet the action of the poem shows that Alfred’s lucidly articulated pessimism is simply an elaborate defense against his feelings. In love and remorse, he tries to kill himself and murder Katie too, crying, “The black porch with its fringe of poppies waits” (233); but his violence is a long-meditated response to the long-dreaded waking of his heart (228, 232). In the end, he is overwhelmed by his own nature, which despite all its sophisticated rationalizations has more in common with the loving idealists Max and Katie than Alfred wishes to admit. The nature of human beings is closely aligned with the loving and creative powers of nature, richly celebrated at many points in the poem,²² and so Alfred’s philosophizing proves hollow. The protagonists of the poem worship and serve the “wild woods and plains” of Canada. The poem emphatically celebrates the cycles of life, death, and life renewed of these Demeter-like “bounteous mothers.” All the three major characters—Katie, Malcolm, and Alfred—undergo ritual deaths and revive again, and by their physical and spiritual labours create in the New World a new and better Eden (236). Morris’s conventional piety offers one form of resistance to the pessimism of Swinburne’s Proserpine lyrics; the joyous secular vision of Meredith and Crawford provides another. The poet laureate takes a third approach, more pious than Meredith’s and more thoughtful than Morris’s. In his late poem “Demeter and Persephone” (1887), Alfred Tennyson—whose complex attitude toward Swinburne, compounded of admiration, contempt, and rivalry, is well documented—powerfully challenges, as Curtis Dahl has shown, Swinburne’s very anti-Christian deployment of the figure of Proserpine.²³ Unlike Meredith—whose buoyant, vividly coloured poems, thickly populated with joyous living things, seem to bounce from another sphere altogether—Tennyson chooses to fight Swinburne on the younger poet’s own ground, depicting a vague, blurred world of doubts and dreams. A “swimming fleece of winter gray” at first cloaks the upper world when Persephone rises at the dawn; Hades moves surrounded by a “drift of flickering spectres,” and his chariot leaves a “black blur of earth.” At the end, Demeter hopes that her daughter will “see no more ... the dimly-glimmering lawns” of Hades’ realm (*Poems* 3: 164–9, ll.20, 26–7, 37, 147–8). As in “The Garden of Proserpine,” there is little of which we can be sure; the winds, the waves, and even the Fates cannot answer Demeter’s queries

²² Notably at the beginnings of Parts II and V (198–202, 223–4).

²³ Dahl suggests that Tennyson’s poem is primarily a response to Swinburne’s “Hymn to Proserpine” (356–62). Dahl points out that both poems look forward to the displacement of inadequate deities but that “to Swinburne’s pessimism Tennyson opposes optimism”; Tennyson replaces Swinburne’s attack on Christianity with “a defense of liberal Christian doctrine” and Swinburne’s concept of a sterile nature with “a concept of nature as regenerative and symbolic of the hope of resurrection A more thorough countering of Swinburne’s religious attitudes would be difficult to find” (360–61). Dahl’s fine analysis underrates the degree of agnostic hesitancy in Tennyson’s poem and does not discuss the poets’ attitude to language at all. For an overview of Tennyson’s reactions to Swinburne, see McSweeney 4–5.

and can only moan, “‘We know not’” (61, 66, 84–6). Demeter learns what has happened to her daughter only through a dream, in which Persephone’s “shadow” wails that “Bright and Dark” have made her “the Bride of Darkness” (90–99). By saying not “Zeus and Hades” but “Bright and Dark,” Tennyson, like Swinburne before him, reduces Persephone’s story and significance to an abstraction. Yet in the midst of these abstractions, through these inadequate counters we call words, flashes of light and significance break out now and then: the nightingale, seeing Persephone’s return, “flashe[s] into a frolic of song / And welcome,” the sun bursts from his “winter gray,” and the mother sees in her daughter’s restoration a token of immortality and transfiguration (11–13, 19–21, 135–47).

Or so she dreams. The reading of Persephone’s resurrection as a type of Christian salvation is at least as old as the *Ovide moralisé*. But for Tennyson’s mother goddess, typology is not a stable system of meaning; it is only a theological speculation. His Demeter is not a confident church but a pagan deity informed by the impulses of a nineteenth-century agnostic, reading her daughter as an unstable symbol (much as Swinburne’s speakers interpret the figure of the Koré in ways that fit their own unstable moods and metaphysics). Tennyson’s Demeter rejects the gods she knows with a mixture of impatience at their inadequate morality (127–34), distress at her own incapacity to find a reliable source of information on the issues of theology and immortality (59–86), and yearning for a better godhead beyond the bounds of knowledge. What she desires most she can only describe as a “Light” emanating from the “younger kindlier Gods” of whom she dreams (129, 136), a light that will bring her into perfect union with all she loves. When the “kindlier Gods” have displaced such violent deities as Zeus and Hades, then, she hopes, her daughter will “dwell the whole bright year with” her (137–47). Interestingly, Tennyson does not present Demeter as one of the gods to be displaced; as earth goddess, she will simply come under Christ’s kindly power, her world acquiring sacramental force as it will show forth His victory over death. Yet the sacramental vision itself is beyond Demeter’s scope; she has no warrant for her prophecy and is simply reading it (very dashing indeed) into the Fates’ ambiguous words, “There is a Fate beyond us” (86, 128 ff.). Following the agnostic theology of H.D. Mansel, Tennyson postulates that it may be—as W.D. Shaw has put it in his discussion of Mansel’s work—“our duty to have faith in a God who is not only unknowable but also inconceivable” (*The Lucid Veil* 124).

Demeter’s incapacity to conceive of the Christ whose advent she prophesies leads not to the ironic pessimism of Swinburne’s “The Garden of Proserpine” but to a visionary (if unstable) hope and confidence. Her faith in her dream of Persephone’s “shadow” has been justified; the “God of ghosts and dreams” has restored Persephone herself—hands, arms, face, and all—“from head to feet,” and the living loveliness of the natural world has at length “chased away” from Persephone “That shadow of a likeness to the king / Of shadows” with which she at first emerged (5, 9, 21–2, 15–17). Beyond shadows, beyond all tropes and signs, Demeter anticipates the inconceivable reality of transformation and immortality, both for herself and for the human race with which she now fervently identifies (74, 100–105). Swinburne uses words to move us beyond what words can say, beyond our “doubtful dreams of dreams” to the nothingness that awaits us; Tennyson

too uses words to evoke “some vision outside of words, some vision beyond the boundaries of consciousness which confronts finite understanding with ... infinity,” and with an unimaginable, reconciling light (Shaw, *Lucid Veil* 135–6).²⁴

At a still deeper level, perhaps, Tennyson-Demeter is in quest of the very surety that Swinburne had brought into question, the confidence that life is worth living. For anyone who grew up in close contact with a person with mental illness, particularly a parent, as Tennyson did, this must always be a difficult faith to attain or to restore. Perhaps one of the secrets of Tennyson’s popularity, beyond his diligently cultivated stylistic grace and power, was that he fought from the beginning of his career what proved to be a rearguard action against the oncoming forces of pessimism. For him, as for T.S. Eliot, a personal doubt and depression proved symptomatic of a wider cultural state, while Tennyson’s repetitive, even obsessive choice of immortal hopes were as generally characteristic of high Victorian culture as Eliot’s early harping on alienation proved to be for the modern era. But Tennyson’s solutions—and even Meredith’s more secular vision—were already losing force in a culture about to be dominated by the Decadents. After “Demeter and Persephone,” no text that I have seen even attempts to find a Christian resonance or a hope of literal resurrection in Persephone’s story.²⁵

The Queen of Darkness: Pessimism from Fitz Gerald to Wharton

O Proserpine, dream not that thou art gone
Far from our loves, half-human, half-divine;
Thou hast a holier adoration won
In many a heart that worships at no shrine.

—George Woodberry, “Proserpine,” *A Day at Castrogiovanni* (1912) 18²⁶

It is significant that Morris, Meredith, Crawford, and Tennyson all feel the need to respond to Swinburnean pessimism, to resist and defeat it in some way. Nothing could more plainly indicate the growing power and importance of the movement

²⁴ Priscilla Johnston has pointed out that Tennyson was deeply interested in the Persephone myth from childhood on; long before Swinburne wrote his Proserpine poems, Tennyson had translated part of Claudian’s *De raptu Proserpinæ* and had begun using the myth, in a disguised form, in his own works, from “The Lover’s Tale” (1828) onward (68–92 passim). But in most of these works, Tennyson’s overt focus is on heterosexual love rather than on immortality. Stange (74) and Johnson (66) suggest that Tennyson’s underlying concern is really with the nature and experience of the poet, who must cyclically explore the underworld of his imagination, or his subconscious, and return to the public world of day.

²⁵ The failure of “Demeter and Persephone” to persuade later writers is interestingly at odds with the reception of the poem; early reviewers celebrated the title poem’s transcendence of despair (“Editor’s Study” 806; Payne, “Recent Books of Poetry” 280) and found in Tennyson’s Christian vision a “peculiar charm” (“Tennyson’s New Poems” 421).

²⁶ Woodberry had already published an appreciation of Swinburne (*Swinburne*, 1905), and this poem follows “Hymn to Proserpine” in its agnosticism and focus on the desirability of death.

that Swinburne had been the first to articulate poetically. “Proserpine’s especial poet” (as the *Saturday Review* described Swinburne in 1905 [A Daughter of Dreams 57]) had long since abandoned pessimism; he no longer yearned to catch “Some gainless glimpse of Proserpine’s veiled head” (“Ave atque Vale”), and his later poetry suggests that he might have had more in common with Meredith and Crawford than with his earlier self on topics like the value of life and the healing vitality of nature. Yet *fin-de-siècle* culture came to perceive his early lyrics of the underworld as crystallizing the very spirit of the age. The eponymous neo-Darwinian hero of Jack London’s novel *Martin Eden* (1909) drowns himself on rereading Swinburne’s “The Garden of Proserpine”: “At last he had discovered the cure of his ill” (409). F.W.H. Myers’s 1893 article, “Modern Poets and the Meaning of Life,” honours the same poem as a sombre but extremely important response to the discovery “that the universe is in no way constructed to meet the moral needs of man.” Describing the lyric as “perhaps the most wonderful” of all Swinburne’s poems, Myers continues:

There is here far more than the Lucretian satisfaction in the thought that we shall sleep tranquilly through the hazardous future No, there is here a profounder *renouncement of life*; there is the grim suspicion *which has stolen into many a heart*, that we do in truth feel within us, as years go by, a mortality of spirit as well as flesh; that the ‘bower of unimagined flower and tree’ withers inevitably into a frozen barrenness from which no new life can spring (Myers 190, 196 [my emphasis]).²⁷

The “iron-shod despair” that had seemed like a gratuitous spiritual assault to Morley in 1866 is now perceived as expressive of a popular “suspicion,” a widespread apprehension of psychological sterility, and a quasi-Schopenhauerian “renouncement of life.” Similarly, Schopenhauer’s “[s]trange, melancholy, and deterrent” philosophy could be dismissed by the *Saturday Review* in 1863 as a fascinating anomaly—“His brilliant talents have attracted worshippers without kindling conviction” (Rev. of *Hegel et Schopenhauer* 325)—whereas by 1892, his name had become a catchword: “Schopenhauer and Hartmann are in the mouths of many people who have not read their works” (Bradford 363). Amy Levy, in her poem “To E.” (1889), describes a poet who “talked for hours / Philosophy (sad Schopenhauer’s).” By 1902, the anonymous author of a brilliant article entitled “Modern Pessimism,” which appeared in the *Quarterly Review*, could explain that:

pessimism has entered upon a new phase; it has become less revolutionary and more reflective, less sentimental and more scientific, less personal and more general; it makes its appeal to the universal heart. It is also more readily accepted as a theory of life by the cultivated class, and has succeeded in impregnating

²⁷ That writers as conservative politically as Bridges and Wharton could publicly espouse pessimism also shows that pessimism had lost much of its shock value since Swinburne’s day.

modern modes of thought to a remarkable extent, fully entering into the spirit of the age and influencing every department of literature and art. (622)²⁸

This new spirit is clearly visible in the works of women writers from the late 1880s on. Caroline Fitz Gerald's little-known "Hymn to Persephone" (*Venetia Victrix and Other Poems*, 1889) focuses on Persephone as an embodiment of natural process but takes a rather melancholy view of that process. This lyric shows the impact of the tradition begun by Swinburne—not only in the title but in the "dim" and "faded" atmosphere of the poem, in the Swinburnean pairing of contrasting images, and to some extent in the suggestion that Persephone's new wisdom is that of grief and loss rather than that of sexual initiation. However, this lyric presents the goddess solely as representative of the natural cycle and the "immortal pain" inspired by our knowledge of that cycle; through her we may hear the music of Persephone's happy childhood in "the meadow's morning dew" and also the more sombre chant of her mature experience, her "godhead's ceaseless moan." Where Swinburne's more elaborate stanzas lead us step by step to an apprehension of the inadequacies of language and the emptiness of life, Fitz Gerald's more traditional and hymn-like stanzas—each beginning, "Oh, fill ..."—insist that Persephone's wisdom, though sorrowful, is full, substantial, and capable of infusing the speaker's "song" with meaning (70–71).

The goddess embodies tragic experience again in Mathilde Blind's more sophisticated poem, "The New Proserpine" (*Birds of Passage*, 1895), which implicitly challenges the whole tradition of male poetry on goddess figures. Written by an atheistic feminist revolutionary, this lyric seems at first to present a conventional picture of the female as objectified beauty and sweetness, enclosed in a pastoral setting:

WHERE, countless as the stars of night,
The daisies made a milky way
Across fresh lawns, and flecked with light,
Old ilex groves walled round with bay,—

I saw thee stoop, oh lady sweet,
And with those pale, sweet hands of thine
Gather the spring-flowers at our feet,
Fair as some late-born Proserpine.

Yea, gathering flowers, thou might'st have been
That goddess of ethereal brow,
Revisiting this radiant scene
From realm of dolorous shades below.

²⁸ The journals of the period offered numerous explanations for the growth of pessimism, which I summarize in Appendix A, "The Sinister Influence: Causes of *Fin-de-Siècle* Pessimism."

Thou might'st have been that Queen of Sighs,
 Love-bound by Hades' dreadful spell;
 For veiled within thy heaven-blue eyes,
 There lay the Memory of Hell. (78–9)²⁹

As the poem proceeds, it is clear that Blind presents the traditional objectification of the female only to subvert it, for in the last two lines we are forced suddenly to realize that the pale beauty we see has a self, a past, and an experience at which we can only guess. We are encouraged to ask what lies beyond the veil of heavenly loveliness, what this individual woman has suffered (for the conditional mood of “might'st have been” reminds us that she is separate from Proserpine), and also what Proserpine herself might have felt on her return to the flowery meads from which she had been so violently snatched. The sudden grimness of the ending leaves us with a sense of the jagged edges of the myth and of the difference between the “thou” and the “I” of the poem. As later, in Wharton's “Pomegranate Seed,” we find that there are voices we cannot hear, so in “The New Proserpine” we are simply unable to share the Proserpine figure's “veiled” experience.

It is telling to contrast Blind's approach here with Tennyson's evocation of Hades' consort in “Demeter and Persephone” (a poem Blind would certainly have known). Although Tennyson's Demeter is at first “Awed” by her daughter's “imperial disimpassioned eyes,” she seems to know exactly what those eyes had seen—phallic Hades, “the serpent-wanded power.” She also points out that neither Proserpine's eyes nor anyone else's have ever seen what she, Demeter, has just beheld: “The Life that had descended” emerging once again into life and light (ll.23–31). Proserpine here has no subjectivity, no store of separate experience inaccessible to her mother, and no voice; Tennyson's Demeter spends most of the poem discoursing on her own experience and theological speculations, and in the end, she blandly embraces her daughter as a new aspect of herself (ll.140–47). By contrast, Blind does not examine Proserpine's relation to her mother at all. This Proserpine has been painfully imprisoned by her husband's love for her or hers for him (the ambiguous compound “Love-bound” in l. 14 echoes Greenwell's “Demeter and Cora”); that imprisonment may be the focus of the goddess's—and the lady's—terrible memories. But the poem chiefly stresses not this but the shocking contrast between the beauty that we can see and enjoy and the hell experienced by the female self. Not by accident does the title of this poem of the 1890s suggest the “New Woman” of the era, who was beginning to assert her right to have and be a separate self in sexual, political, and financial terms.

In their works on Persephone, each of these male Victorians provides a monolithic vision at the end of the poem; we may not be granted certainty, but we do know what

²⁹ Reproduced online at <http://www.indiana.edu/~letrs/vwwp/blind/birds.html> as part of the Victorian Women Writer's Project. The *Saturday Review* praised *Birds of Passage* for its “weight of thought and fervour” while gently deploring the technical carelessness of the verse (Rev. of *Birds of Passage* 242); a somewhat similar note is struck in Payne, “Recent Books of English Poetry” 210. Arthur Symonds edited Blind's poetry in 1900.

we are intended to conjecture and to hope for. In Blind's "The New Proserpine," as we have seen, we end with a splitting—between the idyllic landscape and the experience of the woman who seemed at first to be an accessory to the landscape, and between the consciousness of the speaker and reader and the inaccessible consciousness of the woman who is in two senses the poem's real subject. Blind seems to be questioning the very tradition of using goddesses as figures for the beauty and harmony (or, for that matter, the despair and disharmony) that male artists may project onto women. To restore subjectivity to a goddess who is given little or none in Swinburne, Meredith, and Tennyson is to point out how women have been mis-seen and misinterpreted.

As Blind fragments the monolithic vision of these male Victorian writers, so in the early twentieth century, even before the outbreak of the First World War, do we see texts on Persephone that are philosophically fragmented, structured in such a way as to present a debate—or perhaps simply a statement of irresolvable difference—between pessimism and a more hopeful vision of the world. In William Sharp's unfinished closet play "Persephoneia" (1903), a priest has been blinded by his vision of Persephoneia carrying flowers that wither into ash; the goddess tells him that she has never been aware of him "Save as a shadow flickering in the silence" and that he should either bathe his eyes in the sea, where possibly other gods may help him, or lie where she herself may either heal his blindness or kill him—ambiguous advice that leaves everything uncertain (*Poems* 1: 314–7, 322–3).

In the same year, the dramatic monologue "Persephone" by Canadian Arthur Stringer gives us a goddess who feels the beauty of the earth all the more for her masochistic delight in Hades' bed; she dismisses her earlier Olympian calm when, she says:

... wrapt in white eternities I walked
A daughter of the gods, who knew not Death:
I was a thing of coldness and disdain,
Half-losing all that was so dear in life:
Enthroned in astral taciturnity,
I, looking tranquil-eyed on beauties old,
E'er faced some dull Forever ... (17)³⁰

Only the knowledge of an endless death enables a vital joy in life, and Persephone's fate embodies that of all mortals, "half in gloom and half in sun" (18). A similar but unresolved tension appears in Marjorie Pickthall's connected lyrics "Persephone Returning to Hades" and "The Little Fauns to Proserpine" (1905). The first of these poems follows the drift of the goddess's thoughts as she bids farewell to her sleeping mother, sadly gathers the last fruits and blossoms of the season ("Long beautiful berries ripening on the thorn, / With one wide rose that had forgot to die"), and then feels the numbing influence of the yawning underworld overcome her living feelings and memories:

³⁰ This is an interestingly late deployment of the anti-Olympian topos.

What was this earth-born memory I would hold?
 Almost I have forgotten. Lord, I see
 Before, the vast gray suburbs of the dead;
 Behind, the golden loneliness of the woods,
 A stir of wandering birds, and in the brake
 A small brown faun who follows me and weeps.
 (*The Complete Poems of Marjorie Pickthall* 178–9)

Like Fitz Gerald, Pickthall perceives here a nature infused with melancholy, although this poet also infuses her vision with a peculiarly Canadian nostalgia for the forested wilderness being displaced by the growing cities. Persephone sees the underworld as “vast gray suburbs” and looks back not to fields of wheat but to the “golden loneliness of the woods” (a line that has its own haunting woodwind assonances). Yet Persephone’s mood of sorrow shading into apathy is contradicted by the companion poem, “The Little Fauns to Proserpine,” in which the fauns celebrate the energies, joys, and affections of earthly life (*Complete Poems* 180).

It is, of course, striking that the speakers for earth’s delights should be fauns, rather than Demeter, who is entirely passive in “Persephone Returning to Hades” and absent in the sequel. Both the Canadian women discussed in this chapter seem quite uninterested in the mother-daughter bond, at any rate within the context of Persephone’s story³¹; Fitz Gerald and Blind do not mention the topic either. Yet in the prewar works of Bridges and Wharton, we can see an attempt to close the gender gap that had opened in the mid-nineteenth century and to combine the issues raised by male and female poets in the Victorian age.³² At the same time, the atmosphere surrounding the discussion had of course altered since the 1860s. Women now might be alienated from their mothers not merely by heterosexual initiation but by exposure to education of a kind from which their mothers had been debarred; in both Bridges and Wharton, as we shall see, the maiden becomes imbued with a sad philosophy that is potentially more estranging, so far as the mother is concerned, than any degree of sexual

³¹ In the 1970s and after, however, writers like Margaret Atwood and Marlene Nourbese Philip are more intensely interested in the mother-daughter bond than are their British and American contemporaries.

³² Not only were the texts by Tennyson, Swinburne, and Ingelow (discussed above) still widely available in collections and anthologies, but they were also quoted in popular handbooks of mythology: lines 57–64 of Swinburne’s “The Garden of Proserpine” and lines 121–5 of Tennyson’s “Demeter and Persephone” appear in Katherine A. Raleigh, *The Gods of Olympus, or Mythology of the Greeks and Romans* (1892), 166, 136; and the fifth stanza of Ingelow’s “Persephone” is quoted in Alexander S. Murray, *Manual of Mythology* (1895), 82. Murray also lists Meredith’s “The Appeasement of Demeter,” Tennyson’s “Demeter and Persephone,” and Swinburne’s “Song to Persephone” [sic] among the references at the end of his article on Demeter (90). Ingelow’s status near the end of the nineteenth century was still so high that, when Tennyson died, a group of American writers signed a petition that the British crown should appoint her as poet laureate.

experience could be (see Bridges, *Demeter: A Mask* 57).³³ As we have seen, pessimism was now a significant part of the mainstream culture to which the New Woman was increasingly winning access; Bridges and Wharton both choose to retell the Persephone story in dramatic form, with a climactic confrontation in each text between a naively hopeful Demeter and a pessimistic Persephone.

Robert Bridges's most frequently performed play, *Demeter: A Mask*, was "written in 1904 at the request of the ladies of Somerville College, Oxford, and ... acted by them at the inauguration of their new buildings in that year" (*Demeter* 57). Appropriately for the terms of its commission, the play explores a female community. Young Persephone is advised by Athena and Artemis and sports with her naive young female friends, the Oceanides, before she is torn from the group; the last two acts of the drama focus on Demeter's grief and fury and on the final, difficult rapprochement of mother and daughter when Persephone returns from the dead. Edith Wharton's "Pomegranate Seed" was not written for dramatic presentation but is cast, like *Demeter*, in the form of a verse play. We first see Demeter comforted and informed by Hecate, and then (after a brief interlude with Hermes) Demeter's reunion with her child provides at once the climax and the central conflict of the text. Bridges shows that optimism and pessimism both emanate from the passing phases of experience and both generalize—too readily, perhaps—from moments in the long and difficult progress toward a true vision. As we shall see, Edith Wharton develops Bridges's approach but radically questions his premises.

Initially, Bridges's Persephone refuses to recognize the existence of evil, reveling blindly in "earthborn ecstasy" (I. 100). But Athena and Artemis warn her that evil and cruelty are parts of life and pity is an "Infection" of the human mind (I.122–8, 147–68). Such teachings are repellent to Persephone as the maiden, but when she returns from the underworld to her mother at the end of the mask, she understands the "mystery of evil" (III.958) better than any other goddess, for she has entered the Cave of Cacophysis (κακος = evil + φύσις = nature). In a passage that Bridges intended to be spoken "very slowly" (61), and that therefore is probably central to his purpose, Persephone reports that she:

saw
The meaning and the reason of all things,
All at a glance, and in that glance perceiv'd
The origin of all things to be evil,
And the énd evil: that what seems as good
Is as a bloom of gold that spread theo'er
May, by one stroke of the hand,
Be brush'd away, and leave the ill beneath
Solid and foul and black. (III. 1056–64)

At the same time, both Demeter and Persephone have independently conceived of a shrine "to the unknown Cause," where the initiates will see "The meaning and

³³ I am obliged to Michael Kerry McDonald for drawing my attention to this play.

the reason of all things” and perceive “The origin of all things to be good, / And the end good.” Evil there will be understood as a “film of dust” that can be brushed away to show the good “Solid and fair and shining” (III.1003–19). This answer to Cacophysia, of course, will be the shrine of Eleusis; the “mystery of Hell,” Demeter seems to suggest, will be incorporated into the Eleusinian rites (III.1073–4). Through these rites, initiates will come to understand that sorrow is their “life-companion, / To be embrac’t bravely”; what humans need is not immortality but the wisdom to accept and value pain, believing in the “solid ... and shining” good below and beyond it (III.814–29). This is Demeter’s vision, the optimistic faith that Cacophysia is “like a dream / To waken’d will” (III.1070–71).

Although Persephone can conceive of Eleusis, she does so only to convey to her mother, by contrast, the nature of Cacophysia; the queen of Hades does not endorse the vision of the queen of earth. The hideous mystery of evil, which Persephone barely has words to express (III.961–72, 1054–7), does not dominate her own vision now (“the thought / Is banisht from me,” she says in III.961–2), but there is no indication that she embraces an alternative view of the world. In fact, Bridges originally planned to end *Demeter* on a note of Cacophysian pessimism, according to Margery Fry, the Somerville librarian who had commissioned the play. Donald Stanford explains: “She objected that this was not proper for young ladies on a festive occasion and insisted that the ending be rewritten. ‘He retorted that I was like those who would put a happy ending on to Romeo and Juliet’” (40).³⁴ In his enforced revision, Bridges allows the audience to feel that the vision of despair need not damage or paralyze those who confront it. As Greenough White remarks in a different context, “Out of the Styx of pessimism a hardy soul emerges clad in ... impenetrable mail” (“A Study of Modern Pessimism. II” 347).³⁵

What matters to Persephone is simply the fact that she has seen the worst and has not allowed it to drown her in despair or to affect her capacity for love (III.1065–6). She has embraced sorrow more directly than her mother has done, and the courage she has created through this almost existential decision is what enables her to console her mother instead of being consoled by her. The mystery of hell is wrapped within the mysteries of earth, the mysteries of Demeter’s Eleusis; the optimistic metaphysics suggested by Demeter and by the probable impact of the play in performance, with its joyous ending, are ways of softening and familiarizing the ineluctable facts of pain and loss. Cacophysian pessimism is experienced as a part of the worst suffering possible, but Persephone refrains from erecting a metaphysics or an ethics on that basis and merely presents her

³⁴ Stanford points out that Bridges was extremely anxious and depressed at this period because his wife and younger daughter had both contracted tuberculosis. However, the prevalence of Schopenhauer’s thought and of pessimism in general during this era meant that personal grief could all too easily modulate into philosophic dogma. Bridges’s religion was ardent but nebulous, combining a warm interest in Protestant spirituality and hymnody with a deep distrust of the clerisy (*Selected Letters* 1: 341–2, 437).

³⁵ It may be relevant that John Milton Scott, the year before *Demeter* was published, had described pessimism as “the criticism of ideal life upon actual life” and as a necessary stage in progress (qtd in White, “The Noble Cause” 760).

remembrance of that dreadful vision—to her mother and presumably to the initiates later at Eleusis—as an assurance that the vision can be survived, that it need not destroy our lives.

Persephone's character is curiously elusive, perhaps because she is so much a subjectivity in process; as a type of the female intelligence that can learn and contemplate anything, however disturbing or horrific, without being harmed by her discoveries, she is a suitable model for the new students at Somerville. (We should remember that there was great anxiety at the turn of the century that higher education would psychologically or physically damage women.) Throughout the play, Persephone is said to be beautiful, but we do not have much sense of her physicality; her initial sensitivity to the "penetrant / Palpitant exultation" of earth's "fond desires" modulates into an indomitable spiritual serenity (I.102–3, III.932–4), and while Demeter in her rage is a vivid physical presence, "With smoky torch in hand," "Her golden-rippling hair upon her shoulders shaken," all that matters about Persephone's appearance is the crystal crown that marks her new triumph of self-control (II.350, 363; III.852–62). As in Swinburne's hymn, where Aphrodite has a material presence and Persephone is merely an emblem of a particular kind of consciousness, so here Bridges contrasts the passionate goddess through whom life is perpetuated with the less embodied, more deeply contemplative queen of death.

In Wharton's "Pomegranate Seed" (1912), however, the contrast is not between a passionate body and a contemplative mind; it is between a living body and a body shadowed with the tokens of death, between the emotions involved in the will to live and the emotions involved in repudiating that enormous force. Like Greenwell and Ingelow, Wharton in her treatment of the myth strongly develops the physical and emotional connection between mother and daughter. Demeter thirsts and hungers for her daughter; she identifies with mortal women who, recalling the children they have lost, "feel a babe's hand at the faded breast"; she remembers how she brought forth a daughter "of [her] body" and laughed for joy at the birth. Persephone, on the other hand, combines an ailing body and an alienated mind. Although she rejoices in the "earth's warm pressure under foot" and the pressure of her mother's hand, the returning daughter is pale, and upon her head "Sits an estranging darkness like a crown"; her voice is "paler than the lips it leaves," her ears cannot bear "the sound of life," and within her eyes is the vision of despair (287–9). In Swinburne's Proserpine poems and in Schopenhauer, Persephone's bodilessness suggests a liberation from matter; in Bridges, her relative immateriality suggests the controlling power of the mind and will on our emotional responses to the material world. In Wharton, the goddess's pallor expresses the pain and distress of the material world, not the calm of something separate from that world.

Though we cannot be sure that Wharton had read Bridges's *Demeter* or Greenwell's Persephone poems, there are many significant parallels.³⁶ Like Greenwell

³⁶ Bridges first received widespread attention in 1912 (thanks to the publication of the Oxford Press edition of his poetry); this was the year in which Wharton published "Pomegranate Seed." A selection of Greenwell's work, including "Demeter and Cora," had been published in 1906.

and Bridges, Wharton brings Persephone and Demeter both powerfully to life; like Bridges, she sets them face to face in a loving yet passionate debate. Wharton's Demeter, like Greenwell's, has given up heaven for earth and speaks for the joys of the ordinary human world, while Persephone seems committed to the world of death; indeed, Wharton's Persephone, unlike Bridges's, emphatically attacks her mother's labours in the service of life and refuses to participate in them. As in Bridges, Wharton's naive Demeter has caused damage with which Persephone has to deal (290, 291); again as in Bridges, Wharton's Persephone has seen the mystery of evil and has been crowned with sombre wisdom, transformed and matured through her vision. However, unlike the Persephone of Greenwell or Bridges, Wharton's can no longer relate to her mother sympathetically, despite their continuing love for one another.³⁷ Demeter and her daughter now have different ideals and speak a different language.

Wharton's concern with language is explicit from the start. Demeter wonders "what word" Hecate can bring her of Persephone, and Hecate answers, "Word have I." Demeter exclaims, "I need / Thy word as the parched valleys need my rain!" Hecate has solid information, emotionally nurturing to Demeter, and Hecate's "word" is figured as material nourishment; the verbal act of one goddess happily parallels the physical act of the other (284–5). Hecate urges Demeter to wait on the "word" of the advancing god Hermes, who comes "Charged with grave words of ægis-bearing Zeus"; the "words" of the most powerful god, says Hermes, are living things themselves, "winged seeds that carry hope / To root and ripen in long-barren hearts" and are "fruitfuller than deeds of men."³⁸ The language of the supreme male deity, seemingly, has the fruitfulness generally ascribed to Demeter; it contains the life that Hecate's word can only nourish.

Yet at this point Demeter's female language strongly challenges the male language of the "Life-giver": her "mortal words" assert a necessary continuity between mother and daughter. "I want no words but those my child shall speak," she retorts to Hermes, and a little earlier cries, "What do the gods avail?"—a question unanswered, as Hecate points out. (So in Tennyson's "Demeter and Persephone," Demeter utters her questions to the gods but finds that nothing answers her.) Demeter now identifies herself absolutely as a mother and as a mortal doomed to sorrow: "If there be any grief I have not borne, / Go, bring it here, and I will give it suck" (286). She wants no language but that which sustains and affirms the connection between mother and daughter: her own "kind" are not the gods but the miserable mortals who seek their dead children, "Who ... live upon the words of lips gone dumb" (287).

It is natural, then, that her first words when Persephone reappears are "Speak to me, my child!" Persephone does speak and tenderly greets her mother's tears and

³⁷ Donovan, however, finds in this text "the luring of the daughters out of their mothers' gardens into the patriarchal symbolic" (49), a reading I will argue is only partially correct.

³⁸ It is interesting to contrast Bridges's Hermes-Demeter confrontation: his Demeter despises Hermes' "empty words, the mask of war," and he protests at her "relentless" and "weighty" words ("Mask" 576, 580, 596).

the gentle graces of the earth, the fragrance of hawthorn, and the “warm pressure” of earth underfoot. But her first two speeches warn Demeter that the daughter is irrevocably separated from the mother and from the full, vivid life of earth. Synaesthetically, Demeter exclaims, “Thy voice is paler than the lips it leaves,” and as Persephone begins to express her terror of the living world, Demeter cries, “What are these words?” (288). As the goddesses debate, it seems that Persephone has seen too deeply into life and its ends to love it. She echoes George Eliot’s comment in *Middlemarch* (1871–72):

That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity. (194)

So Persephone asks, using some of Eliot’s very words and images:

Dost thou not hear the noise of birth and being,
The roar of sap in boughs impregnated,
And all the deafening rumour of the grass? (289)

But it is not merely the intensity of “birth and being” that horrifies Persephone; it is the “awful immortality of life” that forever feeds death and misery. Having unlearned such “old unquiet words” as “love,” Persephone is absolutely repelled by Demeter’s relentless appetite for bringing new life into the world (289); the labours of Demeter, of the mother and the farmer, are “Execrable offices,” more “dreadful” than the “still” “listlessness” of hell (290, 289). Like the speaker in Swinburne’s “The Garden of Proserpine,”³⁹ she contemplates “the green field growing / For reaping folk and sowing” with weary distaste and presents the underworld as a quasi-rural place of immobility stirred only by uneasy dreams: there, “still are / The poplars, still the shaken hearts of men.” In Swinburne’s “Garden,” love faintly “Sighs, and with eyes forgetful / Weeps that no loves endure” (“The Garden of Proserpine” 5–6, 79–90); in Wharton’s, through the listlessness of the dead, “there runs / The lust of some old *anguish*” (“Pomegranate Seed” 290, 289). They cannot even yearn for happiness. So Persephone scorns both her mother’s labours and her own; her language is profoundly disillusioned, infused, even as her mother’s is, with the language she hears most. At the end of the play, Persephone, departing, murmurs, “I hear the voices of my dead,” to which Demeter replies, baffled, “I hear the secret whisper of the wheat” (291).

Both linguistically and philosophically, these two goddesses now belong to different spheres. This in itself proves that the “wingéd seeds” of Zeus’s words are

³⁹ Bridges’s Demeter also describes the underworld as “the land that is no land, / The fruitless and unseason’d plain / Where all lost things are found again” (II.446–8).

fruitless: the over-god who supposedly gives language its significance and force cannot in fact reconcile Demeter and Persephone's different discourses, and his claim to centrality within the linguistic system is shown to be hollow. Hecate's seemingly nourishing word has also disappointed, and the "cold murmur" of her "incessant rites" (284) now seems as useless as Wharton (with her expressed affection for the "poor dear maligned Goddess of Reason") generally thought most theological discourse and ritual to be (*Letters* 151, 102).⁴⁰ Most painfully, however, the discovery that she and her daughter now belong to different spheres represents a cruel defeat for Demeter; since her daughter can no longer hear or speak her language, the continuity she prizes most is lost. Persephone's vision is not a philosophy but a frightful knowledge that undermines all hope of communication.

What Persephone chiefly represents is the alienation of the modern spirit informed by the philosophy of Schopenhauer and his followers—and this should not surprise us, since Wharton read Schopenhauer in the original as early as 1902, and also, in 1906, Kuno Fischer's volume on Schopenhauer in his *Geschichte der neueren Philosophie*. She describes Fischer's account of the philosopher as "a perfect delight—so lucid & direct in style—almost as good prose as Schopenhauer's—and so full of ideas"; in 1911, she is still enthusiastic about Schopenhauer's exemplary style (*Letters* 56, 102, 240).⁴¹ Her poem of 1912, imbued with this knowledge of Schopenhauer's writing, substitutes for the delicate pessimism of Swinburne's Proserpine poems a painful confrontation between the ardent pursuit of life and a witheringly nihilistic condemnation of that pursuit. For Wharton's Persephone, as for Schopenhauer, existence displays only the disgusting and relentless power of the "will to live" as it perpetuates material life with all its pains. Like Schopenhauer, the younger goddess sees "the world as a hell" worse than the underworld and rejects this hell of the living as well as the mother who represents the life force and who has therefore become her antagonist (3: 388). The "whole knowledge of the nature of the world" quiets the will to live and motivates it to suppress itself (1: 367). Demeter herself declares that she is "but the servant of some lonely will" and that Persephone knows more than she does (291).

Persephone is the more sophisticated of the two goddesses, and her "kingdom of the dead" is wider than the "dear and ample earth," just as the earth is wider than the "little hill" Olympus. Even as Demeter's experience of losing a daughter moves her beyond the bland ignorance of the gods, so Persephone's more direct experience of mortality gives her an authority her mother cannot claim (290–91). On the other hand, Demeter has the last word. Her powerful emotionality and wide-ranging sympathies make her a more touching and dramatically effective character than her ghostly, bitter daughter, so that the reader at the end is torn between two visions and two discourses. Death does make nonsense of life; the "voices of [the] dead" subvert "the secret whisper of the wheat"—but the wheat-whisper goes

⁴⁰ Wharton's commonplace book for 1908 included numerous skeptical and anti-Christian quotations (see Lewis 230).

⁴¹ See also the editors' comments on her interest in German culture (*Letters* 19–20).

on, and the sibilant softness of Wharton's final line at once soothes the reader's disturbance and reaffirms the wheat field's fruitfulness as a value. Working against this effect, however, is the absence of a monolithic vision. A work that begins with an atmosphere of primitive religion ("darksome rites / Unnameable" [284]) concludes with a very Modernist fragmentation, with debate and questioning, and with a confrontation between a sentimental discourse made up of "unquiet words" and a quieter, paler language of the dead that the living cannot quite hear. Wharton's text demonstrates, unnervingly, that discourse is what you make it (half a dozen different visions of language are exemplified in this eight-page text) and implies, even more unnervingly, that the most potent language is that which is least accessible and most nearly "blank."⁴²

A much later short story of Wharton's, also entitled "Pomegranate Seed" (1936), makes this last point even more vividly. In this text, Kenneth Ashby, a widower who has remarried, receives letters (appropriately in grey envelopes) from his dead first wife; when his agitated second wife opens one of the letters after Kenneth has vanished, she finds that the paper is almost an "absolute blank," though she can make out dim writing and read "something like 'mine'—oh, and 'come.' It might be 'come'" (*Collected Short Stories* 2: 786). On the wall behind the living wife is a blank where the dead wife's picture used to hang, and the living wife, Charlotte, makes the connection:

"Why shouldn't I say it, when even the bare walls cry it out? What difference does it make if her letters are illegible to you and me? If even you can see her face on that blank wall, why shouldn't he read her writing on this blank paper? Don't you see that she's everywhere in this house, and the closer to him because to everyone else she's become invisible?" (2: 787)

What cannot be heard or read, Wharton suggests, can exercise supreme power; the language of the dead dominates us by its very inaccessibility. Kenneth will never be seen again, and to her mother-in-law's optimistic statement that some explanation will be forthcoming Charlotte cries scornfully, "An explanation? Who's going to give it, I wonder?" (2: 788). Once we are sensitized to the significance of blankness and absence—to death and its mysteries, to Persephone and her "paler" voice, "the words of lips gone dumb"—that wan whispering language outshouts all the noisiness of life. Persephone need only say, "Mine. Come." As Swinburne puts it, "She waits for each and other, / She waits for all men born" ("Garden" 57–8).⁴³

Demeter's loving and forlorn confrontation with this terrifying figure in Wharton's play reminds us, however (as Swinburne does not), what a price we pay for

⁴² For a discussion of "blankness" as a theme in *fin-de-siècle* women's writing, see Leighton 1–14.

⁴³ It is in Wharton, for the first time since Swinburne's poems, that Persephone lives up to her name and becomes the "death-bringer." Kestner has implied that the popularity of Persephone in late nineteenth-century art reflects a misogynistic cultural association of the female with death (12), but, as Munich puts it, "gender tensions revealed in Victorian representations of the myth cannot be so simply, or so negatively, characterized" (3).

learning Persephone's discourse, for embracing Persephone's wisdom. Demeter's vivacious, outgoing tenderness dramatically counterbalances Persephone's anger and arrogance. In this way, Wharton complicates and challenges a monolithic pessimism, even hinting that a "wisdom" that comes at the cost of the capacity to love and to feel may be an illness or a loss of nerve (288–9).⁴⁴ At the same time, she exploits and rebukes other Victorian treatments of the myth. Wharton's Demeter at first assumes that her Persephone, like Morris's, loves "her doom" (289), but she is told that such "old unquiet words" as "love" are unknown in the stasis of the underworld—the meeting of ghosts there seems appalling in a way that Persephone cannot quite articulate—and Persephone here represents the hopeless alienation of the soul rather than its redemption (290). As for the heterosexual passion that in Morris sacramentally represents divine love, in Wharton this passion is the province of Demeter; she offers to "wake the sleeping seed . . . / Among young men and maidens," while Persephone (like Schopenhauer) is outraged and disgusted by these "[e]xecrable offices" of procreation (290).⁴⁵

Wharton's primary target may well be Tennyson's hopeful "Demeter and Persephone."⁴⁶ Tennyson's Persephone at first seems altered and shadowy, with "imperial disimpassioned eyes" (23), yet she revives entirely. When she returns to the field of Enna and treads the "black blur" left by Hades' chariot, that very "space / Of blank earth-baldness ... breaks into the crocus-purple hour" (48–50). Wharton's Persephone, as we have seen in both of the texts entitled "Pomegranate Seed," is a frighteningly "blank" figure herself. Tennyson's Persephone says only, "Mother!" (22); Wharton's engages in passionate debate. Wharton adopts Tennyson's suggestion that Demeter, on losing her daughter, develops new sympathy for mortals and scorn for gods ("Demeter and Persephone" 100–105; "Pomegranate Seed" 190–91)—but Wharton ironically adds Persephone's parallel development of a new pity for the dead and scorn for life. Tennyson's Demeter finally envisages a time when together she and her daughter send their life "From buried grain through springing blade" and reap "The worship which is Love" (143–7); Wharton's Demeter must realize that her daughter is cut off from life, from love, and from her. In short, Wharton's play shows itself keenly responsive to Victorian treatments of the myth but also keenly critical of them.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ I am grateful to my former student Lori Walter for suggesting this reading of the text.

⁴⁵ For Schopenhauer's views on procreation, see *The World as Will and Idea*, 3: 370–81.

⁴⁶ Even metrically her stately, flexible blank verse seems designed to evoke his; her imagery also seems to echo Tennyson's, both in its touches of pathos ("women ... who feel a babe's hand at the faded breast" [287]) and in its specific, brief observations of natural phenomena ("Between the first white flowering of the bay / And the last almond's fading from the hill" [285]).

⁴⁷ Wharton read widely in English poetry, memorizing much of Tennyson at an early age, but of the writers discussed in this chapter, Wharton seems to have preferred Meredith, whom she met in 1908 (*Letters* 6, 165). Perhaps in this play about the rise of division where love once was, her own separation from her husband and the end of her affair with Morton Fullerton may also have influenced her views on pessimism.

For Wharton, after such knowledge as Persephone's, no forgiveness is possible. The difficult rapprochement of mother and daughter in Greenwell's "Demeter and Cora" is beyond hope in Wharton's play, and the resignation achieved by Ingelow is equally inaccessible. Moreover, for nearly all these writers, especially the urban expatriate Wharton, the agricultural cycle implicit in Persephone's traditionally cyclic return to life seems altogether irrelevant. It is not by accident that the next generation of poets—urban expatriates like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot—should set much of their work in a limbic wasteland, a shadowy underworld from which redemption is hardly imaginable.⁴⁸ It is perhaps more surprising that the issues raised by Ingelow, Greenwell, and Blind were to become the issues most ardently debated and explored in the Persephone poems of the twentieth century. Writers from H.D. and Sylvia Plath to Michèle Roberts and Rita Dove, in their poems on the myth, focus precisely on the complex relation between mother and daughter, especially after the daughter's heterosexual initiation or marriage has challenged the original primary bond; the varying forms and kinds of sensuality; and the ways in which the objectifying gaze blinds itself to the reality of a subjective experience different from its own. Meanwhile, those living in the twentieth century's wasteland struggle not to reject but to rediscover the will to live. Like everything else, the triumph of pessimism is fleeting.

⁴⁸ The influence of Bridges and Wharton on Modernist perceptions of Persephone was probably limited. Bridges' *Demeter* received mixed reviews: the *Saturday Review* said that the play's "philosophisings" were "not strikingly original" ("A Daughter of Dreams" 57). The *Living Age* was kinder but commented on the "lack of vital heat" within the verse ("Mr. Robert Bridges' 'Demeter'" 506). Wharton's "Pomegranate Seed" was published only in ephemeral form within a journal and never reprinted.



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Chapter 4

The Virgin with the Sheaf: Fertility, Ritual, and Imagination in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *My Ántonia*

It needs only that the ordinary course of things be interrupted in order to vindicate to common things an uncommon significance, *to life, as such, a religious import*.

—Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) 278

Shall I ever complete it? and under what circumstances?, begun as it is, in the margin between a wood and a ripe corn-field, with the faint shadows of grasses and ears of corn falling across my page.... I lie so close to the ground that my only view is of tall corn, so crisp that in the breeze it stirs with a noise like the rustle of silk. ... There is only one personality present: Demeter.

—Vita Sackville-West, autobiographical fragment (1920), qtd in Nicolson 4

A world of wheat renews the hope of man.

—George Woodberry (1912) 29

We have seen Persephone among the flowers, or approaching grey suburbs; we have also seen her as an embodiment of or a voice for blank nothingness. What we have not seen, in poems of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is the virgin with the sheaf in her hand—Virgo bearing Spica, the archetype imposed by an agricultural society on an amorphous scattering of springtime stars. What has happened to the daughter of the corn goddess, to the rural Persephone who embodies the promise of food and the regenerative energies of the field?¹ Has the rural Kore altogether vanished in the Victorian era, dragged down into nothingness by the deadly hand of an urbanizing, industrializing Hades? Has the fertility that she embodies become irrevocably demonized by pessimism?

It is true that the industrialized world was rapidly approaching the last historical moment when an agricultural interpretation of the myth of Demeter and Persephone could hold Western readers' attention. For millennia, the agricultural cycle had been the essential basis of life, as indeed it still is in much of the developing world, but, in the West, the economy was shifting in ways that would radically reconstruct our relationship with "nature."² Yet this very shift created, in some quarters, a new sensitivity to what was being lost—not only a way of life, but a way of seeing,

¹ Meredith does celebrate that promise and those energies, but he has difficulty in situating them within Persephone.

² For a balanced presentation of what is lost and gained by this, see Hardy's essay "The Dorsetshire Labourer" (1883) (Moynahan 714–36).

a pattern of perception and feeling. It was in 1890 that Frazer published the first edition of *The Golden Bough*, with its almost obsessive emphasis on fertility cults and the cycles of vegetative growth. Here, of course, Demeter and Persephone are both interpreted as corn goddesses, essentially identical in nature—though, following Pater, Frazer adds, “[I]n the long course of religious evolution high moral and spiritual conceptions were grafted on this simple original stock” (*Spirits of the Corn* 90).³ Unlike Pater, however, Frazer is interested primarily in the “simple original stock” in fertility cults as the essential basis of all religion.

The pessimistic tradition, of course, drew part of its attack on life from the asceticism that infiltrated pagan thought as early as Orphism and went on to shape much of Christianity. The tradition affected representations of the Kore very early on, as Gilbert Murray points out in 1912:

In the old religion of Greece and Western Asia, [Kore] begins as a Maiden, then in fullness of time becomes a mother. There is evidence also for a third stage, the widowhood of withering autumn. To the classical Greek this motherhood was quite as it should be, a due fulfilment of normal functions. But to the Gnostic and Neo-Platonist it connoted a ‘fall’ The Kore becomes a fallen Virgin. (118)

In this form, she “loses most of her earthly agricultural quality” (Gilbert Murray 119). Yet, as the folklore movement, then Frazer, then the Myth and Ritual School gradually reawaken interest in the rituals of disappearing agricultural societies, literature begins once more to engage with the rural Persephone, to explore and challenge the construction of the “fallen Virgin,” and to reevaluate fertility and celebrate it in a new spirit. In his most popular novel, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891), Thomas Hardy—disciple of Swinburne,⁴ late Victorian agnostic, and early Modernist—explores these issues with the deep ambivalence characteristic of him; a generation later in America, the lesbian writer Willa Cather revises his vision in *My Antonia* (1918), unequivocally celebrating fertility, the fallen woman, and female energies.

³ Compare Pater, *Greek Studies* 91. Frazer points out that we have this myth only in the sophisticated forms in which urban dwellers had reframed it: “[I]f we knew more about the peasant-farmers of ancient Greece, we should probably find that even in classical times they continued annually to fashion their Corn-mothers (Demeters) and Maidens (Persephones) out of the ripe corn on the harvest-fields. But unfortunately the Demeter and Persephone whom we know were the denizens of towns, the majestic inhabitants of lordly temples; it was for such divinities alone that the refined writers of antiquity had eyes; the uncouth rites performed by rustics amongst the corn were beneath their notice” (*Spirits of the Corn* 208).

⁴ On Hardy’s general debt to Swinburne, see Murfin (78–149, especially 137–42, on *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*). In *Tess*, I might add, Hardy quotes *Atalanta* twice and “Fragoletta” once (131, 194, 234), always at painful points in his heroine’s existence, while his ironic use of 1 Kings 18.27 in the rape scene (62), well analyzed by Gallagher (433–4), perfectly parallels Swinburne’s antecedent use of the same text in “Hymn of Man” (1871), on which see my *Swinburne and His Gods* (104–5).

The Fertile Persephone: Hardy, Cather, and the Fallen Woman

We were hauled into the underworld.

—Louise Glück, “The Burning Heart” 8

In the 1860s, a destitute young woman named Wragg had been arrested on the charge of strangling her illegitimate child—a common if bitter tragedy, now remembered for a seemingly flippant comment from a famous writer. “By the Ilissus there was no Wragg, poor thing!” wrote Matthew Arnold, and in the context of this study the remark has a peculiarly ironic resonance (“Function” 3: 273.32–3). The name of the river Ilissus recalls the Lesser Mysteries at which the myth of Demeter and Persephone was celebrated, for the “sacred precinct of Agrai was situated on the banks of the Ilissos” (Kerényi 49). By the Ilissus, in ancient Greek culture, a holy mother mourned her dead child, year after year, her grief honoured in gracious ceremonies at the heart of Greek spirituality. Yet in England (and this is Arnold’s point), a destitute as well as desolate Demeter has been driven by the financial strictures and sexual mores of Victorian society to destroy Persephone herself. Arnold is trying to undermine the self-satisfaction of his prosperous society and, like other Victorians with the same intention, he employs the figure of the fallen woman to embody the misery, desperation, and immorality hidden at the heart of his era.

As we have seen, Victorian Persephones were generally either embodiments of despair and death or else consorts of Hades; they were rarely connected with the victim of seduction or rape who appears so prominently in the socially conscious literature of the age. Only in the literature of the *fin de siècle* and the early Modernist period does it become common to represent Persephone as a rape victim. *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* offers a gloomy revision of the myth. Tess is introduced, emphatically, through the first section title, as a “Maiden,” a *kore*, and we see her initially participating in “the local Cerealia,” or rites of Ceres, reveling at May Day with white flowers in her hand: “the selection of the latter had been an operation of personal care” (10–11). This “pure woman” is raped⁵ and returns to her mother, but not in triumph; Tess is miserable, and her mother vexed. (Far from seeking her to save her, Joan Durbeyfield has actually propelled Tess into sexual danger in the first place.) Tess bears a child who is not the holy Bromios of the Eleusinian rites

⁵ This bald statement somewhat simplifies Hardy’s extremely confusing presentation of the situation. Studies of the textual history of the novel show that as soon as he began to send the manuscript around to the editors of magazines, Hardy came under pressure to modify the story—to tone down allusions to sensuality especially—and his revisions show his own mixed reactions to these pressures. Only in the printed versions do we find many passages that “emphasized Tess’s innocence in the eyes of Nature, [and] stressed that her original surrender had been a matter of compulsion rather than will” (Laird 190; cp. 18–20, 42–3, 57–8, 71–2, and especially 88–9). As Hardy confronted editors’ (and some readers’) resistance to his “pure woman,” he worked harder to make her seem “pure,” by standards with which he may not himself have agreed, in order to bring out the main point that Tess must be perceived sympathetically despite her extramarital sexual experience.

but a sickly creature whom she names Sorrow and who dies technically outside the congregation of the saved; Tess can barely get permission to bury him, under cover of darkness, in a “shabby corner” of the churchyard (82). Tess attempts to rally, and her energies and hopes revive as she becomes one of the milkmaids in a richer, more fertile district and marries a man she loves. However, Angel Clare repudiates her on their wedding night when she confesses her past, and she is thrust back into a social underworld: this point is melodramatically underlined when the sleepwalking Angel (murmuring, “‘My wife—dead, dead!’”) carries Tess to an empty stone coffin and lies down beside her (207, 209). When under terrible financial and emotional pressure she eventually returns to her other Hades, Alec the rapist, she is provoked at last to murder Alec: it is at this point that she becomes a bringer of death. Her brief escape and idyll with Angel end when the forces of the law close in on them at Stonehenge as Tess lies on the altar stone. She is hanged, and she goes into the underworld forever.

As G. Glen Wickens and Felicia Bonaparte have demonstrated, many details of the text heighten Tess’s connection with Persephone, especially during her relationship with Alec. Alec heaps flowers on her, even giving her roses “to put in her bosom” (34); Ovid shows Proserpine filling the hollow of her bosom with flowers. Alec pokes strawberries into Tess’s mouth, as Hades tricks Persephone into eating the pomegranate seeds that prevent her from escaping his power permanently. Alec carries Tess off in his gig-cart, driving recklessly downhill “in a manner that parallels Hades’ seizing of the unwilling Persephone and bearing her away in his chariot to the underworld” (93, 94). Yet Alec himself is only one aspect of the grim power that rules Tess’s life and our own; as Penny Boumelha has pointed out:

It is not only Alec who is associated with the gigs and traps that, on occasion, literally run away with Tess; it is during a journey in a wagon driven by Angel that he finally secures Tess’s acceptance of his proposal. Equally, the two ride to their wedding in a sinister, funereal carriage It is noticeable, too, that during their wagon-ride, Angel feeds Tess with berries that he has pulled from the trees with a whip, recalling the scene at The Slopes when Alec feeds her with strawberries. (58)

Wickens has shown how Angel Clare’s perception of Tess at Talbothays follows the pattern characteristic of mythology according to Pater: as Angel draws closer to “the seasons in their moods,” he becomes infused with an “aesthetic sensuous pagan pleasure in natural life and lush womanhood” and goes on to deify Tess as an embodiment of “the great passionate pulse of existence” (*Tess* 100, 133, 134) until finally she represents abstract qualities, “the chastity of an Artemis, the fruitfulness of a Demeter” (Wickens 89). But her chastity has been stained—according to conventional Victorian views—and her fruitfulness frustrated. Fertility itself, as a value, is called into question when Angel draws for Tess a “lucid picture of possible offspring” who might suffer from a stigma related to her early “fall”; however deeply bourgeois Angel’s specific anxiety here may be,

Tess's reaction here powerfully validates a pessimistic view of fertility. Although "the vulpine slyness of Dame Nature" has hitherto tricked her into an "obstinately recuperative" attempt to win Angel back to her, her honest, "humanitarian" heart is horrified by the prospect of producing "vitalizations that would inflict upon others what she had bewailed as a misfortune to herself": "in some circumstances, there was one thing better than to lead a good life, and that was to be saved from leading any life whatever" (204).⁶

This episode brings into focus the two powerful currents of emotion that Hardy presents: the natural physical energies and hopes making for life, and the "humanitarian" considerations urging that it is more merciful to forestall conception since life may well be a "misfortune" rather than a blessing. As Hardy knew well,⁷ Schopenhauer had presented the pessimistic "humanitarian" view with savage dogmatism, whereas Swinburne had done so with a weary melancholy. Bridges and Wharton, very likely influenced by Hardy, were to pit the two forces against each other through the confrontation of a pessimistic, grimly experienced Persephone and a naively damaging Demeter who insists on pushing forward the offices of life. Tess's irresponsibly foxy mother at times seems to play the role of vulpine Dame Nature, but we also see both currents of emotion operating in Tess herself. Already a Persephone who has become a Demeter when she nurses Sorrow in the cornfield, Tess in her marriage with Angel deliberately puts by the opportunity to become a more effective and more damaging Demeter. To bear life, Hardy feels, is to nurse sorrow throughout the world; the female, having the capacity to bear and nurse

⁶ This recognition decisively pits Tess against her own physical magnificence. As Holloway has pointed out, at Talbothays she "almost succeeds in—there is only one word to use—in germinating. This word is less odd than it seems at first. Hardy lays great stress on the rich blossoming fertility of Tess's environment during this period, and also stresses, discreetly but with great force, her own richly sensuous nubility" (445). At the point at which Tess turns against fertility, she has also to condemn the energies within her that make for life. The self-hatred generated at this point contributes to her apparently self-defeating conduct later in the novel.

⁷ In his literary notebooks, Hardy quotes a *Cornhill* reviewer who remarks, "[I]n Schopenhauer we have the latest German poet" (Björk #1232, 1: 141), copies out what he calls a "Statement of the case of the Evolutionists, Materialists, Pessimists &c" including the lines, "The whole constitution of the world (so stupidly does it work) would be an imardonable crime did it issue from a power that knew what it was about" (#1301, 1: 152); quotes from Schopenhauer and from Sully's *Pessimism* (##1367–9, 1: 170; ##1782–1800, 2: 28–31; #2230, 2: 143); and copies from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* article on Schopenhauer what is defined as the "central principle" of Schopenhauer's pessimism: "so long as the will to live remains unbroken, happiness in the true sense is impossible" (#1529, 1: 203). He also comments on a statement that "Schopenhauer has given place to Hegel Pessimism has had its day": "Comforting, but false" (#1908, 2: 55). While Hardy's complex philosophy should not be simply identified with Schopenhauer's (indeed, Hardy was often annoyed at being called a pessimist), he read more widely in the literature of pessimism than Swinburne did and was more deeply and permanently impressed by that philosophy than Swinburne was.

life, is therefore a threat to the world that is only subdued when she suppresses her own innate physical energies and capacities.⁸ Everything that connects Tess with “vulpine ... Dame Nature” is represented as a possible instrument of suffering, and it is in discussing these aspects of Tess that Hardy tends to stress her femaleness. He speaks of her “feminine hope” of winning Angel back to her sexually and says that “it would have denoted deficiency of womanhood” if she failed to realize that she might manipulate her husband through propinquity (204). For him, Tess rises morally by abandoning such feminine hopes. The reader is encouraged to feel with her (and admire in her) the “obstinately recuperative” energies and powers of nature, yet at the same time—both intellectually and emotionally—to deplore with her those same energies and powers.

When a version of Persephone’s story lacks an effectual Demeter, includes two Hades figures, and pits Persephone against her own recuperative power, it is not surprising that the cycle of descent and reascent is finally stopped at the most hopeless point. Hardy stresses the extraordinary vulnerability of a woman in a violent male world. Tess is strong, vital, able to earn her own living, and capable of defending herself by force at moments, yet Hardy presents her as essentially helpless, defeated by an immense array of forces from without and within, particularly by invasive male power in many forms: the destructive violence and financial manipulation of the first Hades figure (it is worth noticing that Pluto, Hades’ Roman counterpart, is associated with wealth); the double standard of the second Hades figure and his class; the education that teaches Tess bourgeois morality; the mechanization that alienates even rural labour from the rhythms of the earth, making a hard winter harder still; the law and its representatives; and the dominant Christian faith. When Tess’s child dies, this Demeter cannot even raise a mighty “mother’s childless cry” (Tennyson, “Demeter and Persephone” 32) but must stumble through the forms of the Christian religion in the hope of winning her child everlasting life. In the moment of this impromptu christening, Tess appears to her siblings “large, towering, and awful—a divine personage,” but she is a goddess bereft of power (80). Yet, given the broader difficulties of life itself, perhaps Tess is most nearly divine in Hardy’s view when she opens her heart to defeat. In Hardy’s eyes, we are all permanently imprisoned in Tartarus, and only the loveliest aspects of the natural cycle can make us forget it.

Throughout the novel, the Persephone myth is subtly revised so as to convey this large, complex, and sombre vision. Unlike Swinburne’s Proserpine, Tess descends to a figurative underworld and rises again, but in the end, she descends once more and becomes a literal *persephone*, a bringer of death. Like a Frazerian corn spirit, this Persephone becomes a Demeter—a mother in the cornfield, a mother lamenting her dead child—but, finally, she and the fertility she embodies are both hopelessly compromised, thwarted by damaging masculine forces.

⁸ Here Hardy anticipates, and perhaps influences, the argument of Otto Weininger’s *Sex and Character*, which was to influence many male Modernists.

The agricultural cycle may grind on, but it is no longer idyllic; it becomes a part of Tess's oppression; and in the end she has dropped out of it.

Cather's novel *My Ántonia*, "a celebration of the mysteries of triumphant Demeter" (Donovan 112), responds to and revises *Tess*. Cather's admiration for Hardy is well documented in her early articles and reviews. In 1895, she mentioned him as one of the three "great living novelists" in English and more specifically declared, "I admire the lofty conception of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*." However, it was the dramatized version of *Tess*, as adapted by Lorimer Stoddard (with Minnie Maddern Fiske in the title role), that seems to have entered most deeply into Cather's mind. She saw the play several times in 1897—four times in one week—and "wrote three long pieces about it in six months," earnestly praising the text for retaining "[t]he spirit of Thomas Hardy" and of Hardy's vital representation of "English country life ... that simple, vigorous, earthy life." The play in her view expresses a "religion of human suffering" (Curtin 848, 195, 267, 448, 443, 444, 447).⁹

In the play, of course, we do not have Hardy's explicit allusion to *Tess* as Demeter or the parallels between Tess's story and Persephone's. What the dramatized *Tess* did provide was a powerful modification of Hardy's working-class heroine. Stoddard's Tess, when asked by her departing Angel, "How will you live?" replies, "By work, as I have always done. That's not a lady's hand" (Marguerite Roberts 109).¹⁰ There is no parallel speech in the novel, although Hardy's Tess is seen working and Stoddard's is not. Stoddard's heroine has a self-conscious pride in her labour that is designed to appeal to an American audience and has its echoes in Cather's Ántonia. Tess as played by Fiske possessed for Cather an even "greater" stature than that of Hardy's heroine: "I only remembered the magnitude and the awful dignity of her sorrow" (qtd in Curtin 444). It is also true that, in the play, Tess's mother interferes far more aggressively than in the novel, fighting strongly for what she conceives to be the benefit of the family and even stealing the note in which Tess tries to inform Angel, before marriage, of her "fall." Stoddard's Mrs. Durbeyfield may have influenced Cather's portrait of Ántonia's disagreeable mother, who angrily snatches from her neighbours anything that might be useful to her family.

In both novels, however, the mother is a peripheral and not particularly appealing character; in both the daughter is separated from the mother's world by her slightly superior education, which allows her to speak a different language (in Tess's case, something approaching standard English; in Ántonia's, English instead of the family's native Bohemian), but this does not seem to distress either mother or daughter much. In both novels, the heroine's father is a weak man, from a higher class than his wife, and his self-destructive behaviour leads to his

⁹ Cather's admiration for Hardy continued undiminished throughout her life; in 1925 she praised his atmosphere and in 1939 listed him as one of the authors who should be regularly taught in schools (Bohlke 156, 191).

¹⁰ There are some other differences between Stoddard's play and Hardy's novel: Marian is a more complex and less sympathetic character in the play; the action is much simplified and the financial pressures on Tess heightened.

death (Tess's father drinks heavily and at last dies of fatty degeneration of the heart; Ántonia's father shoots himself). Ántonia, like Tess, is a large, healthy, strong, and beautiful rural labourer with a warm heart and a sensitive imagination; again like Tess, she goes off to work in a lecher's home, is tricked into sexual relations with a worthless man, and bears an illegitimate child, which (like Tess) she cherishes tenderly. But Ántonia's child flourishes and even grows up to bear a "little prince" of her own (228), whereas Tess's baby dies in infancy. Ántonia, like Tess, begins her life again and finds a better man, but Cuzak allows himself to be made "the instrument of Ántonia's special mission" (235) without too much repining, whereas Angel Clare is outraged by Tess's history and wrecks her life again by abandoning her and returning too late. Hardy's novel incorporates a polemic against the undeserved suffering of "fallen women";¹¹ Cather celebrates a female triumph, a resurrection. Tess loses everything, but Ántonia wins a gentle husband, an enormous and vital family, a farm of her own, and the work she loves and was born for. It is much truer of her than of Tess that "The recuperative power which pervaded organic nature was surely not denied to maidenhood alone ... some spirit within her rose automatically as the sap in the twigs" (*Tess* 84–5).

Organic fertility is the central motif of *My Ántonia*, and Cather celebrates it unabashedly. The heroine is perceived throughout as a Demeter figure; though she also relives Persephone's fall in Book IV of the novel, in her Demeter's fertility subsumes and triumphantly compensates for Persephone's vulnerability. As in *Tess*, there are two Hades figures in this novel—Wick Cutter¹² and Larry Donovan—but they are peripheral; Larry, who seduces Ántonia, never even appears. Pessimism and despair are increasingly discredited through the triad of male suicides in the novel, each more irrational than the last: Ántonia's father despairs in a hard winter; a tramp kills himself in summer, when "[i]t's nice everywhere," as Ántonia says wonderingly (115); Wick Cutter arranges to die after murdering his wife, in an excess of pure spite. The compassion with which the reader is invited to contemplate Mr. Shimerda fades to bewilderment in the case of the tramp and unequivocal condemnation in the case of Wick Cutter. Through these episodes, the death wish is made to seem less and less admirable. By contrast, Ántonia creates an idyllic "green world" around her; generally, the male figures in the novel are no match for the female energies of the heroine and her friends and helpers—Mrs. Harling, Mrs. Stevens, Frances, Jim's grandmother, and Ántonia's formidable female friends.

¹¹ And therefore aroused controversy (Boumelha 46–7)—far more than Cather's novel, or even than the dramatized versions of *Tess*; one critic at least objected to the morality of Stoddard's *Tess* but at the same time admitted to being "belated, provincial, and puritanical" (qtd in Marguerite Roberts xlviii). The admission perhaps testifies to the potent effect of Hardy's novel.

¹² What name could possibly be more suitable to a god of death? Like Alec d'Urberville, Cutter embodies the Plutonian wealth of a capitalist society antithetical to the wholesome agricultural society represented by Ántonia; however, unlike Alec, who merely enjoys his privileges in a ruthless but unsystematic way, Cutter is every inch a predator.

Ántonia is like Tess, again, in that she has two or three warm female friends, working women like herself; she too is parted from those friends, but what we hear of their later fate suggests that more than one way of life is possible for women. Tiny Soderball goes out to the Klondike and makes a fortune, and Lena Lingard becomes a respectable and successful dressmaker; the two of them may even sustain a lesbian connection, although Cather's discretion makes this uncertain. (By contrast, Tess's friends are, like her, made wretched by their obsessive love for Angel: the dairymaid Marian becomes an alcoholic, Retty kills herself, and even Izz, the strongest of the three, loses her spirit.) For Cather, work rather than passion sets the tone of a woman's life. Even for Ántonia, so tender-hearted that she makes a "warm nest" for a grasshopper, first in her hands and then in her hair (27–8), the work of the farm seems to be at least as rewarding and necessary as her maternal activities, and she speaks of the trees in her orchard much as she speaks of her children (217, 219).¹³

My Ántonia celebrates the entrance of agriculture (and, more dubiously, culture) into a wild land, frontier Nebraska; the heroine's work is meaningful, delightful, prosperous—part of the gentling and re-creation of a new world. Eventually, Cather's heroine becomes the matriarch of her own farm, a goddess who orders and nurtures her world as she would have it. And it is a world evoked in terms traditionally associated with the female: we see her in an orchard "surrounded by a triple enclosure," filled with "the deepest peace" and "full of sun, like a cup," and adorned with crabapples "as thick as beads on a string, purple-red" (219–20). Hardy's "fallen woman" can revive and make a new life for herself temporarily, but society—embodied especially in the prejudices of the man she loves, the psychological instability and economic power of her rapist, and the financial constraints of her family—refuses to let her sustain this independence; in contrast, Cather's Ántonia, creating her own small society in her enclosed enclave, recovers from her "fall" completely. Fertility in this novel is an unquestioned value.

Life as Ritual: Hardy, Cather, and the Ancient Rites

Though Cather takes a drastically revisionist approach to Hardy's views on fertility, femaleness, and the sexual "fall," she shares with him a deep interest in pagan ritual and mystery. In this, they both anticipate the Modernists of the 1920s. Hardy read Frazer, but it is uncertain whether either of the novelists knew much about the Myth and Ritual School. Yet, like Harrison and her associates, Hardy and Cather are deeply concerned with the tension between the alienated individual of modern society and the group mind that, in the view of the Cambridge Ritualists, is the only true source of religion. Both novelists make heavy use of ritual and

¹³ This emphasis on work as more significant than sexuality is as important as Jim's much-discussed fear of sex in explaining why Cather's novel is less passionate than Hardy's; both novels are strongly sensuous, but the sensuousness in *Tess* is erotic and the sensuousness in *My Ántonia* is essentially prepubescent.

folklore as well as myth. They imply (like the Cambridge Ritualists) that ritual is more important than myth or theology to the religious sensibility, and they go beyond the Myth and Ritual School in suggesting that we live out the very patterns of behaviour that are formalized in ancient rituals of sacrifice, scapegoating, and communion.

Moving through a world of rituals deliberately or inadvertently re-enacted—from the “Cerealia” or club-walking at which she first appears to the scene at Stonehenge, where she becomes society’s scapegoat and sacrifice—Tess constantly links the modern era with its oldest roots. In fact, two eras and two classes struggle within her. Tess is a rural labourer, first seen marching in perfect harmony with other countrywomen. Yet, as many critics have pointed out, Tess’s aristocratic ancestry and middle-class education increasingly complicate her relationship both to society and to nature. After she loses her virginity, her education, separating her from her cheerfully amoral mother, makes her feel like a guilty intruder within the natural world, but Hardy insists that these feelings are without foundation: they are “a cloud of moral hobgoblins It was they that were out of harmony with the actual world, not she” (72). Nursing her illegitimate baby in the cornfields, she is “a portion of the field”; wandering through the summer dawns, she seems a Demeter (74, 111). Angel Clare finds in her “something which carrie[s] him back into a joyous and unforeseeing past, before the necessity of taking thought had made the heavens gray” (102).

Tess embodies a world of primitive and powerful natural feelings, but this is not how she experiences herself—not how she consciously feels and thinks. A rural society that still embodies something very close to a group mind is not inclined to blame Tess for her sexual “fall,” but the “morality” she acquires through her brief formal education and her exposure to Angel Clare does force a sense of guilt upon her. At the same time, the strain of Tess’s experiences and conflicts creates in her “the ache of modernism,” which she often expresses in almost Schopenhauerian terms, for “Tess’s passing corporeal blight had been her mental harvest” (105). Serving the agricultural cycle literally, she also embodies mentally the Persephone of Swinburne and Wharton, who learns grim truths from her descents. Yet she recognizes that the same grim truths bear upon everyone. Indeed, this recognition adds to her pessimism: “The best is not to remember that your nature and your past doings have been just like thousands’ and thousands’, and that your coming life and doings’ll be like thousands’ and thousands’” (107). The alienated intelligence is enabled by its alienation to provide a commentary on the experience of the group, but it remains, willy-nilly, distressfully, part of the group, even though its self-consciousness may destroy the compensatory sense of fellowship enjoyed by less thoughtful members.

If religion is the product of the group mind, as the Myth and Ritual School had insisted, it is important to remember that the group includes the whole of a society; if the society is deeply divided about its aims and needs and cannot achieve emotional consensus, the religion is bound to reflect these divisions. The intellectual inconsistencies that critics like Ian Gregor have long noticed in Hardy’s explicit philosophizing are created, I believe, by the novelist’s conscientious

attempt to reflect these divisions. But to Hardy, as to the Myth and Ritual School, creeds are essentially insignificant. In a primitive society, religion is not a matter of faith, as it is to later Protestant traditions, but of acts, of performing the sacred rituals necessary to maintain the fertility of the earth.¹⁴ So it is possible to have many versions of the same myth without compromising the religion to which that myth seems central. For the myth only explains, or at best complements, the ritual that is the true centre of religion.

Hardy, I suggest, believes that this primitive understanding of religion is valid: in religion, human ritual and action ought to have central status, but Christianity attempts to reframe or displace these elements, giving priority to myth and theology. The crucial rituals in *Tess* are re-enacted not as formal ceremonies but as patterns in life that are very difficult to avoid reliving. As Catherine Gallagher has demonstrated, in *Tess* “atavistic urges survive all new dispensations” and ritual sacrifices are re-enacted, both in Tess’s murder of Alec and in the famous climactic scene at Stonehenge (435, 436–9). Yet Hardy differs from the Myth and Ritual School in that, for him, formal rituals, like the primitive sacrifices at Stonehenge, are merely shadows and imitations of what actually happens in life—not expressions of desire to manipulate the world and improve life, as in Frazer, nor sacramental expressions of mystical feeling, as in Harrison.¹⁵

Nature, though it seems luminous and idyllic beside Alec’s capitalistic exploitations or Angel’s greyly intellectualized proto-Modernism, nevertheless always produces more life than the world can comfortably accommodate: as rural labourers, the Durbeyfields are miserably pinched, and Tess is talking about a “blighted” world even before the beginning of those troubles that constitute the plot (25). Violence and exploitation predate Alec’s capitalism; his rape of Tess may have its counterpart in her medieval ancestors’ casual rape of other peasant girls (63). Above all, the deepest emotions of human society, in Hardy’s view,

¹⁴ “When the religion of primitive peoples came to be examined, it was speedily seen that, though vague beliefs necessarily abound, definite creeds are practically non-existent. Ritual is dominant and imperative ... [Man] feels and acts long before he definitely thinks ... [H]e worships, he feels and acts, and out of his feeling and action, projected into his confused thinking, he develops a god” (Jane Harrison, “Darwinism and Religion,” *Alpha* 152, 161).

¹⁵ Harrison’s view of religion is perhaps most clearly defined in her essay “Alpha and Omega,” in which she contrasts *eikonism*—the representation of a numinous something as “a definite, intelligible, someone, articulate and distinct”—with *aneikonism*, which “does not make its gods, it finds them—finds them in the life of Nature outside man, or in the psychological experience, the hope, the fear, the hate, the love, within him Starting with a vague effort to seize and imprison the unknown terror or delight within or without, ... aneikonism is the outcome rather of emotion than of intellect, begotten probably in that early stage when thought and emotion were not segregate as now” (*Alpha* 202, 203). She mentions Demeter among the other “mystery gods” as expressing the aneikonic spirit better than most of the Olympians: “The mystery gods *are* eikonic, caught in lovely human shapes; but they are life-spirits barely held; they shift and change” (204, 205).

combine both a natural physical desire and need for agricultural and human fertility and an undercurrent or countercurrent of feeling (articulated only by the sensitive and intelligent, but perhaps sensed at some level by all) that life is an ill gift and that fertility should be thwarted and punished. The deliberate sacrifice of life then would express both *eros* and *thanatos*, both the desire for more life (since the sacrificial death supposedly purchases more life for others) and the longing for death (since real or figurative death itself is placed at the centre of the most sacred rituals). Neither Victorian middle-class Christianity nor Victorian liberalism can readily rewrite the scripts created by the needs of an agricultural society and an overfecund nature. On the contrary, the Victorian Christian or liberal who flatters himself that he can tear up these scripts and replace them is likely (like Alec and Angel) to find that his own impulses and struggles are small things in the grip of such powerful forces and that the scripts contain and largely direct his own life. If anything, the struggles of Christians (like old Mr. Clare, or the sign painter, or Alec in his evangelical phase) and liberals (like Angel) to reshape the patterns of life seem ultimately to make these patterns even more cruelly destructive. Yet it is Tess herself who is most painfully trapped in these ancient scripts.

My Ántonia, too, shows characters unconsciously re-enacting ancient rites. For instance, at one point Jim inadvertently takes on the role of *pharmakos*, or scapegoat, when he undergoes a brutal assault at the hands of Wick Cutter. Ántonia goes to work for this Hades figure at his “half-buried” house (137), although he has already “ruined” two girls and set up one of them as a prostitute (133–5). However, Ántonia has enough sense of self-preservation to be uneasy when Cutter is setting the scene for a rape and, at the suggestion of Jim’s grandmother, Jim is sent to sleep in Ántonia’s bed. There he undergoes a beating at Cutter’s hands that is a symbolic rape; it leaves him “covered with blood,” bitterly ashamed (he insists that no one should see him or know what has happened), and alienated from Ántonia: “I felt that I never wanted to see her again. I hated her almost as much as I hated Cutter. She had let me in for all this disgustingness” (158–9). Beaten until he seems reduced to animal or even vegetable status (his cut lip projects like a snout, and his nose swells “like a big blue plum”), Jim seems both a ravished Persephone and a Frazerian scapegoat, loaded with the shame and misfortune from which his suffering frees others. Like a scapegoat, he is immediately severed from his community—he refuses to see anyone but his grandmother and soon leaves town for good (158–9).

More importantly, Evelyn Helmick has argued that, in the last two sections of *My Ántonia* especially, the heroine’s life re-enacts the Eleusinian Mysteries (173–85).¹⁶ As Helmick explains, in the spring, at Agrai, the Lesser Mysteries unfolded the tale of Persephone’s abduction and return. In the autumn, the Greater Mysteries, so far as we can trace them, provided a proclamation of the birth of a divine child (this section was known as the *legomena*); the symbolic representation

¹⁶ On Cather’s acquaintance with “the history of the Eleusinian Mysteries,” see Helmick’s note (185).

of events in Demeter and Persephone's lives (the *dromena*); the showing of objects sacred to Demeter and Persephone (the *deiknymena*); and the supreme revelation, which involved "the reaping of an ear of corn in a blaze of light" (the *epopteia*). Finally "the votaries emerged to complete the long celebration with song and dance, further torchlight processions, and a sacramental meal" (Helmick 176–7). In Book IV of *My Ántonia*, Jim is instructed in the Lesser Mysteries, hearing how Ántonia left the prairie to marry Larry Donovan—a passenger conductor on the railroad, "who later runs to 'Old Mexico'—Ántonia refers to it as 'down there'—when he and his fellow conductors are described as evil men. Although the allusions are slight, they serve to identify Ántonia's would-be groom with the underworld" (Helmick 180). In Book V, Jim meets Ántonia's children, "tumbling out of the cave into the light" (Cather 226); he witnesses a re-enactment of the mystery of death and sees Ántonia maternally comforting her children for the grief that death brings; he sees, too, the array of preserves in the fruit cave; and he is shown, in the glowing afternoon sun, the sacredness of life and of the vegetable world. Helmick relates each of these events respectively to the *legomena*, *dromena*, *deiknymena*, and *epopteia* of the Eleusinian rites. Finally:

At the feast, instead of the sacred cakes and *kykeon* of Eleusis, the celebrants dine on *kolaches* and milk. All eyes are excitedly on Ántonia during the dinner, and as afterwards, carrying the lamp, she leads the party into the parlor—a re-enactment of the torchlight procession in the Greek festival—where the children provide the musical entertainment. To the very last event, the sequence of rites on the Cuzak farm has paralleled that of the Eleusinian mysteries. (Helmick 184)

What is the meaning, the function, of this parallel to the Mysteries, this lived ritual? First, it heals Jim's alienation: "I had the sense of coming home to myself" (Cather 238). Like the Mysteries of Eleusis, it yields a revelation that cannot be spoken: "we possessed together the precious, the *incommunicable* past" (238; emphasis mine). The lived ritual reveals "the meaning in common things" and creates a sense of union with the source of life and the agricultural cycle, "the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last" (227). And the rite also establishes Jim in what he clearly considers the right relationship between himself and Ántonia: the relationship of child to mother and of initiate to goddess.

Twilight Enlargements: Hardy, Cather, and the Making of a Goddess

The stages, it would seem, are: actual life with its motor reactions, the ritual copy of life with its faded reactions, the image of the god projected by the rite, and, last, the copy of that image, the work of art [Art] springs straight out of the rite, and her first outward leap is the image of the god.

—Jane Ellen Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual* (1913) 191–2

In many respects Jim is a revised version of Hardy's Angel, just as Ántonia is Tess *rediviva*. Both Angel and Jim are "gentry" who enjoy dancing with lower-class women and fall in love with working women (shades of Arthur Munby!);

both fall short in animal vitality and interpolate “something educated, reserved, subtle, sad, differing” into the heroine’s world (Hardy, *Tess* 94). Both are avant-garde in their principles but not in their sexual behaviour and expectations; both despise convention and yet are strongly affected, at key points in the novels, by a conventional hostility to the “fallen woman.” Most important for our purposes, each projects divinity onto the heroine of the novel in which he appears. In both texts we see a woman transfigured and glorified by the imagination of a cultivated man; in both cases her real strength, dignity, and energy emerge for the reader as something finer, more truly worthy of veneration, than Angel or Jim can entirely conceive. Hardy and Cather explore and delicately criticize the projective imagination; yet, at the same time, both authors reveal the real grandeur of the women in question and the proper uses of the imagination itself.

To this end, both Hardy and Cather focus on scenes where an unusual mixed or dim light enlarges the objects it reveals and endows them with mythic stature. Tess, avoiding company after her fall, takes to wandering in the woods “when the light and the darkness are ... evenly balanced,” a time that yields “absolute mental liberty,” so that “the plight of being alive becomes attenuated to its least possible dimensions” (72). At these times, the narrator assures us, Tess is entirely one with her surroundings, though she does not realize it; she becomes a kind of nature spirit tragically persuading herself that nature condemns her and projecting “moral hobgoblins” on the wind and rain (72). Her misuse of imagination contrasts with the narrator’s and the reader’s use of imagination to conjure up her “flexuous and stealthy figure” as an “integral part of the [natural] scene” (72). Later, in the “mixed, singular, luminous gloom” of dawns at the dairy, “Tess seemed to Clare to exhibit a dignified largeness both of disposition and physique, an almost regnant power” (110); it is at moments like this that Angel calls Tess “Artemis, Demeter” and sees her as “a visionary essence of woman” (111). Angel is almost right—Tess has the “dignified largeness” he ascribes to her—but he misnames his goddess: “‘Call me Tess,’ she would say askance” (111). He sees her with “a sort of phosphorescence” on her face, but “In reality her face ... had caught the cold gleam of day ...; his own face, though he did not think of it, wore the same aspect to her” (110). What is worthiest of veneration resides in the human, fallen and fallible, not in the cultivated man’s artificial personifications of purity and maternity.

The confrontation of two dimly luminous faces, enlarged by elemental natural processes, occurs again and again in *Tess* and with ever more sinister significance. When Tess realizes that, against her moral convictions, she is “drifting into acquiescence” with Angel, that “nature” is “in revolt against her scrupulousness,” she observes a common occurrence at twilight, the appearance of sun and moon in the sky together:

At half-past six the sun settled down upon the levels, with the aspect of a great forge in the heavens, and presently a monstrous pumpkin-like moon arose on the other hand. The pollard willows, tortured out of their natural shape by incessant choppings, bec[ame] spiny-haired monsters as they stood up against it. (150)

Celestial bodies commonly seem enlarged when they are close to the horizon, and living things on the earth also seem huge seen against the sun or moon. These are ordinary phenomena. But again Tess's imagination—cultivated enough to resist the impulses of nature—imposes disjunction and hostility where none exist. To her the sun ominously seems to be forging some grim result; the moon, metaphorically unrelated to the sun here, is “monstrous,” but so are the “tortured” willows that stand “against it,” as if a struggle is going on that will divest both parties of their “natural” qualities. So, in their wrestlings with society, their own conditioning, and one another, warmhearted Tess becomes a murderer, liberal Angel a destructive prig, and predatory Alec first an improbable preacher and then a murder victim.

In these twilight scenes, Angel's imagination apotheosizes Tess, seeing her as something more than natural, but Tess's imagination creates symbols of reproach and punishment, implying that her acts are “monstrous.” Even at times of “absolute mental liberty,” the imagination is informed and warped by its previous exposure to social assumptions and stereotypes. The narrator, however, circumvents this difficulty by providing so many perspectives, in different lights and from different angles, that the partial nature of each particular perspective is made apparent. The technique anticipates Cubism. In the next scene in which two massive and complementary powers confront one another face to face, twilight enlargements are replaced by a daylight that chillingly diminishes what it reveals. The drab, featureless swede-field at “starve-acre” Flintcomb-Ash faces the pale, featureless sky above it, and these two confront each other “all day long, the white face looking down on the brown face, and the brown face looking up at the white face, without anything standing between them but [Tess and Marian] crawling over the surface [of the field] like flies” (237–8).

For Hardy, Tess is large—in physique, in spirit, in moral stature—and also, like the rest of us, small and insignificant within a meaningless and inexpressive cosmos; the imagination has to take account of both realities, to see in both the “luminous gloom” of twilight and the light of common day, in order to understand how vulnerable and transient Tess-Persephone is, how deeply worthy of love, admiration, and reverence—and yet how powerless. Hardy's vision both fascinates and repels Cather, who seizes on his twilight enlargements and radically revises them. The famous passage in *My Ántonia* when the plow stands out against the evening sun, “heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun,” “exactly contained within the disk” (156), clearly rewrites Tess's vision of the pollard willows standing monstrous against the low moon; Cather's sun frames and glorifies the instrument of agricultural labour, while Hardy's moon exerts what Angel would call a “grotesque prestidigitation” on natural entities (Hardy, *Tess* 191). The epic grandeur of the vision suddenly disappears—the sun sinks, the plow too sinks “back to its own littleness” (Cather 156)—yet we cannot doubt that the grandeur is real, that Cather means us to understand the heroic element in agricultural labour. While she echoes Hardy's alternation of largeness and littleness, the imaginative energy of the scene is clearly invested in the instant of grandeur.

Cather's understanding of imagination is clearer in another twilight scene that revises several scenes from *Tess* at once. It is the end of Jim's first encounter with Ántonia after her fall:

As we walked homeward across the fields, the sun dropped and lay like a great golden globe in the low west. While it hung there, the moon rose in the east, as big as a cart-wheel, pale silver and streaked with rose colour, thin as a bubble or a ghost-moon. For five, perhaps ten minutes, the two luminaries confronted each other across the level land, resting on opposite edges of the world.

In that singular light every little tree and shock of wheat, every sunflower stalk and clump of snow-on-the-mountain, drew itself up high and pointed; the very clods and furrows in the fields seemed to stand up sharply. I felt the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall. I wished I could be a little boy again, and that my way could end there. (203)

The "fallen" Ántonia is mirrored in the sun that has "dropped" but still is "great," glowing, vitalizing. The moon's ghostly, thin presence suggests Jim's; it draws its light from the sun's yet transfigures that light to something new, and it has its own faint but lovely coloration. Together, the two lights produce one "singular" light in which all ordinary things—even the "clods and furrows"—are seen heightened, vividly alive. Like Hardy, Cather emphasizes the apparent vastness of the celestial bodies when they are close to the horizon and the enlargement of living things on earth in that strange twilight; in Hardy, the willows have already been repeatedly robbed of their fullness "by incessant choppings" and are turning into something terrible, while in Cather, every entity "dr[aws] itself up high" as if inspired to grow to its fullest potential. The mixed, "singular" light—reminiscent of the "mixed, singular, luminous gloom" in which Angel apotheosizes Tess at Talbothays—is the radiance of epiphany. Like this brief, exquisite confrontation of moon and sun, the brief and tender meeting between Ántonia and Jim reveals an unexpected capacity for illumination in each, and what they illumine is not merely their own natures or their own relationship; it is the "solemn magic" of the earth itself.¹⁷

¹⁷ Of course, the image of enlarged phenomena in odd lighting is not original with Hardy; it has been well established in English literature since the use of the brocken-spectre in De Quincey, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Byron. Also, both Hardy and Cather were good enough observers to have noticed the phenomenon independently in the natural world. However, given Cather's obvious debts to Hardy in other respects and the significant parallels in imagery and even in wording between the passages quoted, it would seem reasonable to suppose that Cather is engaging with Hardy on this point as on others. It is notable that in both books, the heroine as well as the hero engages in some imaginative projection, but the hero's is more extensive and more plausible. We are not encouraged to think with Ántonia that Jim has done something very heroic in killing the snake, or with Tess that Angel is a superior being; we are encouraged to empathize with Jim's admiration for Ántonia and with Angel's more deeply erotic delight in a Tess who does seem to be of exceptional stature.

Jim's own sentimental, regressive yearnings are frankly declared in the last sentence, yet his archetypal, mythopoeic imagination correctly intuitively a truth beyond his sentimental consciousness: the truth that he and *Ántonia* are two great powers, opposite yet complementary. Judith Fetterley rightly says that "the text of *My Ántonia* radically undercuts the premises of the image which occupies its center." When Fetterley goes on to declare that "the apotheosis of the earth mother image" is itself "under attack" (48), however, I would qualify this statement. It seems clear to me that Cather both implicitly criticizes Jim's romanticizing and sympathizes with it.¹⁸ The reader is frequently encouraged to perceive the voice of the male narrator as the direct voice of the female author (Fetterley 58), and yet the possessive in the title, the layers of narration indicated in the introduction, and the ways in which *Ántonia*'s story is clearly structured to meet Jim's needs all encourage us to question and explore the process of apotheosis even while we, the readers, may be psychologically refreshed by its results—as Jim has been. Those of us who need the Romantic imagination do so because (like Jim and Cather and the "refined" town people whom Jim in his most vigorous days scorns) "we"—that is, the privileged and educated English speakers whom Cather expected to be her chief audience—have cut ourselves off "below the shoulders" (128), alienated ourselves from the rhythms of the earth, made them mysterious so that only through the Mysteries can we return to them. Cather judges Jim no more harshly than she judges herself and her readers.

Cather does not attack the apotheosizing or mythopoeic imagination as such, but she does show us how it works; she points out the needs from which it springs and the realities to which it may blind us unless we complement it with a vision of plainer truths.¹⁹ Jim's weakness lies not so much in his myth making as in his reluctance to absorb new elements into his myths, his resistance to the essentially living and shifting character of myth, and his failure to acknowledge his own part and power in the making of his goddess. Within the novel, the myth of *Ántonia* as earth mother finds its chief sources in Jim's need for mothering, in his alienation from his own vitality and strength, in his unconscious decision to site these in *Ántonia* and access them through her. By this decision he perpetuates the alienation in some ways, since he will never recognize any of this energy as his own, and he becomes dependent on the presence of *Ántonia* and her family.²⁰ Yet this dependence should be unnecessary, for he *can* relate to the "goodness of

¹⁸ Fisher-Wirth refers to evidence that Cather powerfully identifies with Jim in her passionate admiration for *Ántonia* (and for the woman on whom the character is based) and argues on this basis that Jim's "perceptions, values, choices, and limitations are largely Cather's own" (54). However, Cather is quite capable of intelligently questioning and criticizing her own deepest feelings.

¹⁹ Gelfant calls the novel "a magnificent and warped testimony to the mind's image-making power" (79), but I would suggest that she gives Cather too little credit; we can, after all, only see Jim's limitations because they are written into the novel.

²⁰ This would fit with Donovan's thesis that "Jim represents the autonomous daughter who has developed the powers of the logos in her assimilation into patriarchal culture" but must return to the "matriarchal mysteries" to "inscribe them in history" (112).

planting and tending and harvest” without Ántonia’s mediation—a point made early in the novel when Jim is resting blissfully in his grandmother’s garden before he has even met Ántonia herself. The mystery of his reunion with her is only one of his cyclical returns to “the goodness of earth” (14, 227). On the other hand, Jim’s strategy does enable him to avoid the spiritual deadness of his wife and the Cutters and makes him for the overcultivated reader a “conductor” of sorts, linking the dead world of high culture with the living world of rural culture. Like Persephone, he goes to and fro between the spheres of life and death and can bring messages from one to the other.²¹

He is, in short, the artist. The novel traces stages very similar to those outlined in Harrison’s *Ancient Art and Ritual*: first, Jim’s early life with Ántonia; then, the “ritual copy of life” in his Eleusinian encounter with her in Book V, an encounter that revives and concentrates his early feelings for her so that the third stage—the creation of the goddess-Ántonia in his mind—“springs straight out of the rite”; finally, “the copy of that image” is, of course, the novel itself, the work of art that enshrines *his* image of Ántonia (*Ancient Art and Ritual* 192). As Jim thinks when he is meditating on Ántonia’s friends, “If there were no girls like them in the world, there would be no poetry” (173).

It would seem, then, that Jim’s own relation to the life that Ántonia actually lives is therefore necessarily belated and elegiac if he is to celebrate that life in his art. Art “sustains and invigorates life but does it only by withdrawal from these very same elementary forms of life, by inhibiting certain sensuous reactions”; the artist “renounces doing in order to practise seeing” (*Ancient Art and Ritual* 236, 134). Yet, as Harrison has also insisted, “though the artist’s vision and emotion alike are modified, purified, they are not devitalized. Far from that, by detachment from action they are focussed and intensified” (210). *My Ántonia*, with its seeming lack of structure and plot, is profoundly a novel about “focussed and intensified” emotion. It is interesting in this context that Harrison describes the most fundamental emotion of all in deliberately anti-Schopenhauerian, Nietzschean²² terms as the “will to live” (*Ancient Art and Ritual* 65). The relationship of Ántonia and Jim demonstrates that high culture draws its energy from the vitality of those who live fully, who are whole body and mind, and who are unafraid of life.

²¹ “[Jim] is something like the shadows in Hades as the *Odyssey* describes them, who drinking the hot, rich blood of the sacrificial beasts, take on substance just long enough to tell their stories. Apart from Ántonia, Jim has no story Yet neither would Jim have a story to tell had he been with Ántonia. His vocation is art, and art for him—as for Cather herself, as, indeed, for many of the great modernists—is the parable of loss.” Jim’s “act of narrative itself constitutes a perpetual desirous return toward the lost motherbody from which his life necessarily departed” (Fisher-Wirth 42–3, 47).

²² Nietzsche took up Schopenhauer’s concept of the “will to life” and stood it on its head, celebrating it. In a passage that seems powerfully to have influenced Harrison, he writes: “[O]nly in the Dionysian mysteries, in the psychology of the Dionysian state, does the basic fact of Greek instinct express itself: its ‘will to life’” (*Twilight of the Idols*, 1888; qtd in Stephens 243).

Yet it would be wrong to assume that Cather fully accepts a division between those who live and those who make art that celebrates life, for there is more than one kind of art in *My Ántonia*. Indeed, the book honours a wide range of arts, from foreign masterpieces—Virgil’s *Georgics* and London performances of *The Winter’s Tale* (118, 169)—to the crude stained glass of Black Hawk and the tiny domestic creativities by which the Harlings and Ántonia keep their “relish of life”—playing the piano or charades, sewing pretty things, making candy, or telling stories (102, 112, 113, 116). But the art most important to the action of the book is the dance—as it is also in *Tess*.

In *Tess*, the heroine first encounters Angel when she is at a dance; more significantly, she is watching the drunken barn dance at Chaseborough when Alec d’Urberville accosts her on the night of the rape. The Dionysian revelry of the dance is described in pointedly classical terms: “the indistinctness [shapes the dancers] to satyrs clasping nymphs—a multiplicity of Pans whirling a multiplicity of Syrinxes; Lotis attempting to elude Priapus, and always failing” (53). Like any Dionysian Mystery, this occasion draws the dancers into an emotional, mystical “ecstasy” and “dream” of cosmic unity: they feel that they and nature “form an organism of which all the parts harmoniously and joyously interpenetrated each other” (54–5). This does not prevent them from turning on Tess, so that when Alec offers her a way of escape she accepts it and so falls into his power. As so often in Hardy, vital energy itself impels us to tragedy and death, and the dreams of unity fostered by “indistinctness” are grimly debunked.

Cather, too, presents dancing as the preliminary to Ántonia’s fall, but through a sustained sequence of events that place a much higher value on the dance. It is at the Harlings’ that Ántonia learns to dance, at domestic costume balls that always involve the cross-dressing of one girl (113); she dances first in public with the other hired girls when the black musician, Samson d’Arnault, is playing “like some glistening African god of pleasure, full of strong, savage blood” (123); and when the Vannis set up their dancing pavilion, Ántonia, “the best dancer of them all,” becomes wholly absorbed in the dancing, often attending with Larry Donovan, the railroad Hades who later engineers her fall (131, 142). Dancing for Ántonia is a creative act, not a repetition of familiar steps; with her, “you set out every time upon a new adventure,” since she “was always putting in new steps and slides” (142). Most significantly, she gives up a comfortable job in order to continue her dancing, crying, “My own father couldn’t make me stop!” (133). If this adolescent rebellion gets her into trouble, it also sets the tone for a life in which she satisfies her own needs.²³

By contrast, Jim yields to his grandmother’s tearful appeals and gives up the dancing. It is painfully clear that this represents a capitulation to the small-town narrowness that he despises. Life becomes a “wasteful, consuming process” when “every natural appetite” is “bridled by caution” and by “devices to propitiate the tongue of gossip” (140), but it is specifically to propitiate gossip that his

²³ Later, Ántonia’s daughter Nina dances during Jim’s Eleusinian visit to the Cuzaks (223).

grandmother asks Jim to stop the dancing: “it brings blame on us. People say you are growing up to be a bad boy” (145). Driven by this emotional blackmail to give up a creative activity that celebrates life in the moment, Jim does the next best thing: he acquires the capacity for verbal art that his culture values more, and that enables him to leave town and go to college, where his creative energies can be fostered in different ways. In college, the “places and people” of his early life stand out “strengthened and simplified ... , like the image of the plough against the sun” (168). His imagination, fostered on Virgil, becomes elegiac, investing its heroic energies in other people.

High culture, then, both reflects and protests against this cautious society, against the timidity of people who try “to live like the mice in their own kitchens” (140). Jim’s own burdening timidity and emotional dependence encourage him to cast a “glamour” over the immigrant hired girls, especially over *Ántonia*, who has persevered and prevailed where he succumbed (146). It is because he has abandoned the Dionysian Mysteries that he requires the quasi-Eleusinian Mysteries of his final visit to the Cuzaks. Yet his capacity to appreciate *Ántonia*’s power, and his determination to memorialize it, set him apart from many of his Black Hawk contemporaries and demonstrate at least a partial admission of the heroic energies within the world. Glorifying these energies within the dominant cultural myths of his era and nation, however, he misses some important points even as he draws attention to others.

As Jim presents her, *Ántonia* comes to a land that is entirely untouched, “not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made”; it is she who makes a “country” out of it, plowing and planting and populating it, she and others like her (7). She is “a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races” (227). Within the American cultural context, she strides easily into mythical status as a founder of the nation, a pioneer born to the lot she embraces so happily. And the land she at once tends and embodies, the enormous prairie, is doubly mythified in the novel, as the Eden of Jim Burden’s childhood with *Ántonia* and in the present as a new promised land of exuberant fruitfulness—“a veritable explosion of life” (218). This identification brilliantly combines the self-defining myths of the American Midwest and of the Old South. (The combination is natural enough, since both Cather and Jim spent their early childhoods in Virginia before going to Nebraska and losing their hearts to the plains). At the same time, *Ántonia* (whose very name contains an intractably “foreign” stress pattern) modifies dominant American patterns of myth: an immigrant, she comes not to a better land but to a land that she makes better. Like the other hired girls (none of whom is of Anglo-Saxon descent), she brings into the United States a vigour that Americans like Jim’s family seem already to be losing.

This double perspective is structured into the book. Jim looks backward to Eden; for him *Ántonia* represents “the precious, the incommunicable past,”²⁴ the “affections

²⁴ For Hardy, on the other hand, Tess is entrapped by an “implacable past” (254).

old and true” of the dedication (xxxi, 238).²⁵ However, the story he tells is that of a woman who has retained “the full vigour of her personality” and whose physical presence is “battered but not diminished”: “[w]hatever else was gone, *Ántonia* had not lost the fire of life” (214, 216). As mother and farmer, she nurtures and sustains the life of the present; as the “impulse” within the Cuzak marriage (229), she pushes the couple’s life into the future. She enjoys Jim’s visits and admits that “everybody thinks about old times, even the happiest people” (206), but she does not, like Jim, structure her emotional life around the past. Although we see *Ántonia* exclusively through Jim’s eyes, her story works powerfully against the elegiac drift of Jim’s.²⁶

Like Tess, *Ántonia* is deified, mythified, by those who look at her, but she also has a genuine heroic stature of her own, which we can glimpse even through the distorting, aggrandizing, and occasionally sentimentalizing filter of Jim’s Romantic imagination. To him she is clearly an “earth mother,” separated from sexuality (he cannot have sensual dreams about her), just as to Angel Tess is Demeter and Artemis. Jim’s attitude is understandable: he meets *Ántonia* at 10, when he has just lost his parents; she is “four years older” (30) and a “natural-born mother” (204). The degree to which he depends on her vitality and robust joy in the world is apparent to him only later. But from the beginning, he identifies her with the earth. Her eyes, skin, and hair are brown; in her childhood, she is like the wild earth in spring, her eyes “like the sun shining on brown pools in the wood” (17); grown, she resembles earthy things in their growth—her “neck [comes] up strongly out of her shoulders, like the bole of a tree out of the turf” (79); coming to fruitfulness, she glows with “splendid colour in her cheeks—like those big dark red plums” (99); as an aging mother and grandmother, she is like the stubborn, indestructible earth after its soft vegetation has been trampled down. She becomes “a stalwart, brown woman, flat-chested, her curly brown hair a little grizzled” (213–14). As a child, she sleeps cheerfully in a “round hole ... scooped out in the black earth,” declaring that it is “warm like the badger hole” (50); as an older woman, she has a well-stocked “fruit cave” out of which her children come running (217–18). This womb imagery connects *Ántonia*’s closeness to the earth with her closeness to the female biological rhythm, and we should notice that such images are derived from what *Ántonia* actually does and says—not merely from Jim’s romanticizing fancy, like the similes and metaphors of the pools and tree.

²⁵ Gelfant explores Jim’s “intuitive fear of sex” in detail (60–82; quotation from 62), but I would suggest that although Jim is indeed afraid of sex, he is equally afraid of time, of painful labour, and of adulthood. Most of all, however, he fears hurting those he loves or offending those he honours, and since this trait is traditionally associated with the female, here as elsewhere Cather subverts stereotyped gender roles.

²⁶ “What Jim dreams of regaining is a childhood, idyllic existence; what he fails to read is the myth *Ántonia* is destined to live—the epic of striving, descent, and ultimate triumph” (Ryder 114–15). Or, to be exact, he projects on the myth of “descent, and ultimate triumph” that *Ántonia* lives out a myth of descent and recovered youth—a cyclical myth rather than the progressive, strenuous myth that Ryder finds in *Ántonia*’s life.

What then is *Ántonia* herself? Can we distinguish her from the role she plays for Jim? Clearly, to his shock and dismay, she is a sexual being; her “fall” challenges his assumptions about her. In some ways, she resembles him more than he realizes: like him, she is vulnerable, capable of needs from which her own intermittent myth making arises. For instance, when she finds herself barefoot and unarmed near a rattlesnake, she is so terrified that she apotheosizes Jim after he kills the snake (Jim has a spade and is wearing boots). Again, when she is abandoned and stigmatized as a single mother, she tells Jim that she consults her dead father (a figure with whom Jim strongly identifies) and explains that Jim too is with her even in his absence—just as she and his other early friends are always with him (168, 206–7). In Jungian terms, Jim functions as a positive animus figure within *Ántonia*’s mind, as she is a positive anima for him (Helmick 181)—although he is much less important to her than she is to him, because she is so much more fully engaged in life and because she routinely faces the difficulties he avoids, as we have seen. Further, she really does love the earth and is at ease in it; that much is made clear by her own words (we must assume that Jim reports those accurately) and by the life she chooses. Equally, it is clear that she is comfortable with her reproductive function and with the role of *Kourotrophos* (she enjoys nursing children and entertaining them). But there is no indication that she sees anything particularly sacred about her own tastes; in contrast to Jim’s glowing account of her in the last section, she is markedly down to earth, explaining her contentment as a matter of her personal preferences, acknowledging her vulnerability, and respecting her own strength while acknowledging help from others:

“We’d never have got through if I hadn’t been so strong. I’ve always had good health, *thank God*, and I was able to help ... in the fields till right up to the time before my babies came. *Our children were good about taking care of each other*. Martha, the one you saw when she was a baby, was *such a help to me* ... I belong on a farm. I’m never lonesome here like I used to be in town ... And I don’t mind work a bit, if I don’t have to put up with sadness.” (Cather 220–21; emphasis mine)

This is a human being talking—one capable, like Tess, of profound feeling, and endowed like her with a deep natural dignity. *Ántonia* is a woman to respect. If Jim must have an earth mother, at least he has well chosen the figure in whom he invests his imaginative force. Yet he fails to embrace and only reluctantly acknowledges *Ántonia*’s sexuality, her “sad spells” in town (221), and the greediness—even, at times, the selfishness—of her appetite for life.

Ántonia is an ordinary woman who deserves the wonder and reverence Jim directs at her. His apotheosis of her, and the way in which that apotheosis is undercut, guide the reader to understand the grandeur hidden in her very ordinariness. As in *Tess*, the male lover’s misuse of imagination is not a simple delusion but a way of rousing our emotions so that, as alert readers, we can ultimately follow the author’s more complex and correct use of imagination. Tess and *Ántonia*, like Shakespeare’s Perdita, are “goddess-like prank’d up” (*The Winter’s Tale* IV.iv.10)

by the men in their lives, but this pranking up is revelatory. All three heroines do illuminate—better than Angel, Jim, or Florizel could conceive—the regenerative energies of an innocent sexuality condemned by society. All three heroines offer to the upper-class men who love them a way of reconnecting imaginatively with the agricultural cycle; mythopoeia and apotheosis are way stations on the road to that delight in “the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting” expressed in *Antonia’s* life (Cather 227). *Antonia*, like *Perdita* (but unlike *Tess*), also shows that creative action need not be hopelessly belated, elegiac, and defeated. Yet in Hardy and Cather, at least, the chief focus is less on the apotheosized heroine than on what is revealed by the combination of her nature and actions with her worshipper’s fantasies. And that revelation is as simple as an ear of grain: it is that earth—this earth, with its fertility and its growth—must be central to human religion.



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Chapter 5

“I am Koré”:

The Modernist Underworld and the Rising Persephone

In the early years of the twentieth century, young writers like Willa Cather, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and D.H. Lawrence were already shifting the image of Persephone away from its associations with pessimism and toward a vision of regeneration. While Edith Wharton was still reworking the tensions articulated in the Victorian age, by 1914, much of the distress and angst evoked in literature from Swinburne to Wharton seemed to be fading. Then the First World War lent a powerful impetus to the renewal of angst. In the aftermath of the war, particularly in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the feverish post-war buzz of the 1920s seemed like the thin chatter of shades in Hades; accidia and despair were once again serious challenges to the ambitions and aspirations of serious poets. The image of the underworld, in Eliot's poetry, became an image of the modern predicament. Pound, Williams, and Lawrence had to deal with this image, and by assimilating and moving beyond it, they enriched, complicated, and deepened their concepts of regeneration.

All three of these writers were deeply influenced by the mythography of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; Pound and Lawrence also owed much to Swinburne and worked hard to expand the literary freedoms that he and other late Victorians had begun to earn, at such a cost—the freedom to criticize Christianity, to create alternative religious and ethical visions, and to describe and celebrate unconventional sexuality. We shall see that Swinburne figures in Pound's early Persephone poetry as a high priest presiding over sacred Mysteries. Such writers as Eliot and Richard Aldington turned the pale garden underworld of Swinburne's Proserpine poems into a wan psychic and urban wasteland; there is an astonishingly widespread use in Modernist literature of the underworld as a metaphor for every sort of alienation, as if a collective nervous breakdown has drawn a grey veil between the psyche of the Western intelligentsia and the living world. The underworld for Eliot and his like was not death, nor life, but deathliness: Coleridge's life-in-death. Persephone then could function as a mythological correlative for the alienated psyche, whether she was depicted as helplessly imprisoned in the underworld or, more hopefully, as struggling to find her way out of it; her ascent from the underworld became an ascent out of the condition of deathliness, a psychic regeneration. The development of the underworld as a site of supreme alienation; the struggle to escape the underworld as a return to feeling, to physicality, and to valuing life itself; the celebration of the Dionysian satyr dance in Williams; the development of pagan spiritualities in works by H.D. (the American expatriate Hilda Doolittle), Pound, and Lawrence;

and the growth of Persephone's own vibrant subjectivity, beyond the stereotyped patterns of the Victorian family and of Victorian marriage—all these processes were part of the Modernists' complex answer to the despair of the previous century and of their own.

To discuss these developments in detail would fill another volume at least. Here I shall only sketch out the ramifications of that growing preoccupation with Persephone that we have seen begin and increase in earlier chapters. To the Modernists, this goddess is a far more compelling figure than she ever was to the Victorians; H.D., Pound, Williams, and Lawrence all identify actively with Koré. "Korè [sic] my heart is," cries Pound in "Canzon: The Yearly Slain" (*Canzoni*, 1911; Selected Poems 181); "I am Koré, Persephone," exclaims the protagonist in H.D.'s climactic epic *Helen in Egypt* (1961) (195); and in his *Autobiography* (1951), recalling the feelings that drove him to write *Kora in Hell* over 1917–18, William Carlos Williams laments, "It was Persephone gone into Hades, into hell. Kora was the springtime of my year; my year, my self was being slaughtered (158)." Most interesting, in the drafts for "Bavarian Gentians," we can see the dying D.H. Lawrence increasingly identifying with the bride of death even as he struggles against such an identification. In one draft he remains behind as she descends; in another he follows her, but only as a wedding guest. But in the final version of the poem (as published in 1929), he and she together rush to be "enfolded in the deeper dark / of the arms Plutonic, and pierced with the passion of dense gloom" (*Complete Poems* 2: 697, 974–5). Whether Persephone figures the desire for annihilation, the tragedy of slaughter, the freedom of a new version of womanhood, or the power of regeneration, for several of the Modernist poets, she is what the poet can and must be.

While any contemporary of Swinburne's contented himself, or herself, with offering at most two or three texts about Persephone in a whole oeuvre, the Modernists I have mentioned recur to the goddess of the underworld repeatedly through their long careers. H.D.'s "Demeter" (1917), *Her* (1927), *Asphodel* (1921–22, revised 1926–27), *Kora and Ka* (1930), *Bid Me to Live* (1939–60); Pound's tribute to Swinburne as high priest of Iacchus and "Prosephone" (whose name amalgamates *Proserpine* and *Persephone*) in "Salve O Pontifex!" (*A Lume Spento*, 1908) and repeated allusions to Persephone in *Cantos*; Williams's *Kora in Hell* and his consistent evocation of a Persephone figure in Books 1–4 of his epic, *Paterson* (1946, 1948, 1949, 1951), not to mention his great love poem "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" (*Journey to Love*, 1955), where the speaker takes over the role of Persephone; Lawrence's *The Lost Girl* (1920), "Purple Anemones" (*Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, 1923), "The Ladybird" (1923), *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in its first and third versions (1926–28), "The Woman Who Rode Away" (1928)—the roll call of the most salient texts alone shows how richly an awareness of the Koré informed these writers' work. Yet it was not only a few personally connected Modernists who wrote on this rich and frightening topic. Minor figures like Richard Aldington, Edith Sitwell, Frederic Manning, and Amy Clarke also contemplated the queen of the underworld. The few representative texts we shall consider in this chapter will show that Persephone, as a means of exploring and shaping the literary culture of the early twentieth century, was invaluable.

The Waste Land and the Satyr Dance: Williams and Eliot

Hell's loose every minute ...

—William Carlos Williams, *Kora in Hell* (1920) IX.3, p. 32; XIV.2, p. 44¹

Some features of the Victorian Persephone reappear far into the twentieth century. For instance, the Australian Frederic Manning describes Persephone in Frazerian or Harrisonian terms as a year-spirit: "Only I knew her for the Yearly Slain / And wept, and weep until she come again" ("Korè," 1908; rpt. in Pound *Selected Poems* 182).² This poem inspired a reply from Pound identifying himself with the "Yearly Slain" Korè—his own heart with the cosmic, tragically broken energies of nature ("Canzon: The Yearly Slain," *Canzoni*, 1911; *Selected Poems* 180–81). Wan Swinburnean gardens glimmer in Aldington's "Choricos" (*Images*, 1915) and Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Ode to Silence" (*Second April*, 1921); echoes of Swinburne's "Hymn to Proserpine" proliferate through Lawrence's novels and H.D.'s autobiographical fiction. The idea of a colourless and fruitless underworld revives in urbanized form, to enormous effect, in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

Yet these elegiac reminiscences of the Victorian Persephone and her realm are challenged by a deep emotional resistance to late Victorian gentility, pessimism, and nihilism. As we move from the Victorian to the Modernist era, the underworld changes from a garden to a slum; Persephone, from a spectral lady of peace to an abused, mentally challenged "bad girl" from the wrong side of the tracks; and the atmosphere, from morbid grace to a slapstick world of dark humour or a lyrical, prophetic image of apocalyptic regeneration. Language itself challenges and fragments the perceptions of the reader, whether in the deliberate incongruities of Williams' *Kora in Hell* or in H.D.'s flowing stream-of-consciousness novels. Most important, the value of life is embraced with the vigour that James Frazer and his disciples had associated with primitive peoples. Jessie L. Weston in *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), a book that powerfully influenced Eliot's *The Waste Land*, cries:

What we have need to seize and to insist upon is the overpowering influence which the sense of Life, the need for Life, the essential Sanctity of the Life-giving faculty, exercised upon primitive religions. (44)

The glowing faith in life expressed by Nietzsche, Harrison, and Weston is invaluable to the Modernists and perhaps does more than any other single force to support them, as a group, against the desolating impact of *fin-de-siècle* despair. In the primitive energies of the ancestors "dancing all night on the hills," there might be some renovating force.

¹ All future quotations from this text will be by section and subsection number.

² The influence of Pater's famous description of the Mona Lisa is extremely obvious in the line on Korè's "weary eyes / And heavy eyelids." In 1909, staying with Manning and his companion Arthur Galton, Pound praised what he called "Manning's new poem 'Persephone,'" probably "Korè" under another title (Carpenter 140).

The goddess must recover her physicality, must take part in the satyr dance and the rites and Mysteries that join her with her true mate—Hades or Dionysos. This is the heart of the vision developed by Williams and Lawrence. To Williams, *The Golden Bough* is “a prayer such as might be made / by a lover,” and he inserts into a tender love lyric the words “You also, I am sure, have read / Frazer’s *Golden Bough*. It does you / justice . . .” (*Paterson* 74). The implication, of course, is that the woman addressed is at some archetypal level a fertility goddess, such as those celebrated by Frazer. Further, Williams’s epic hero, Paterson, identifies himself with the Frazerian King of the Wood (in the famous opening chapter of *The Golden Bough*) whose lover is the goddess Diana: “I, Paterson, the King-self / saw the lady / through the rough woods” (*Paterson* 74–5, 234). Still more deeply, Williams is stirred by Murray’s emphasis on the round dance as the origin and perfect symbol of the poetic act: “They dance much as they did then, only, few have an eye for it,” Williams writes in 1920 (*Kora in Hell* XVI.2).

Lawrence too responds profoundly to the nineteenth-century mythographers. On reading Frazer’s *Golden Bough* and *Totemism and Exogamy* in 1915, Lawrence was confirmed in his belief that “One lives, knows, and has one’s being in the blood, without any reference to nerves and brain. This is one half of life, belonging to the darkness” (*Letters* 2: 470). Earlier, however—in 1913—he “got a fearful lot” out of Harrison’s *Ancient Art and Ritual* (*Letters* 2: 114),³ a book that traces both religion and art to the “will to live” (*Ancient Art and Ritual* 65) and discusses the rites of Adonis, Osiris, and Dionysos in the context of folk rituals of death and resurrection. The Dionysian dithyramb was “*the Song and Dance of the New Birth*,” says Harrison; “the whole gist of the ancient ritual was to summon the spirit of life” (101, 138; emphasis hers). Specifically, Harrison emphasizes the vaguely defined yet intense emotion that inspires dance and ritual, which in turn engenders the concept of a god: from the leaders of the dance, seen year by year, arises the idea of the divine dancer, the holy Dionysos who is “always of the people, of the ‘working classes,’ just as the King and Queen of the May are now” (153; see also 71–3, 113, 193, 196). Lawrence’s chthonian working-class heroes (conflations of Dionysos and Dis) and the centrality of emotion to his art and spiritual vision hark back less to Frazer than to Harrison, who declares that “art is of real value to life in a perfectly clear biological sense; it invigorates, enhances, promotes actual, spiritual, and through it physical life” (209).

It is in the work of Williams and Lawrence especially that we find allusions to the Mysteries of Dionysos and Persephone as reconnecting us with our physicality;

³ Lawrence also read Gilbert Murray as well as E.B. Tylor (*Letters* 2: 558–9, 593). Vickery discusses Lawrence’s debt to Frazer at length (280–325) but admits that it was probably from Harrison that Lawrence learned “that the individual goes through critical stages of transition which are analogous to the death and rebirth of vegetation” (281), that chthonic gods were “psychologically and culturally earlier and more important than the Olympian sky gods” (289), and that it is folly to stigmatize chthonian spirits as evil (291–2). See Viinikka for a different assessment of Lawrence’s debt to Frazer and Harrison (51–3).

in this reconnection is the true escape from that ghostly underworld that Eliot called the Waste Land. In Cather's *My Ántonia*, Jim's exposure to the Mysteries may save him from being quite dead below the neck, yet it is only a symbolic and holiday sacrament that he shares at Ántonia's farm; Williams and Lawrence press with furious desperation toward something more complete, an experience of living in the body, a life-changing revival. As Williams recoiled with horror in 1917 from the "calculated viciousness" of war and capitalism (*Autobiography* 158), he began to write nightly an improvised meditation; later he selected some of these improvisations, added some notes, and so put together *Kora in Hell*: "I let the imagination have its own way to see if it could save itself" (*Imaginations* 116). In this highly experimental and difficult text, Williams, a doctor, represents Persephone as a patient whom he visits in her underworld—a slum underworld, riddled with disease and madness, sexual violence, the anguish and elation of the tragic vision: "Something of Nietzsche" (IX.3, XIV.2).⁴ The Greek vision flourishes horribly in a squalid world:

The gods, the Greek gods, smothered in filth and ignorance Here Hebe with a sick jaw and a cruel husband,—her mother left no place for a brain to grow [T]he heroes of Sophocles, of Æschylus . . . go seeping down into our hearts, they rain upon us and in the bog they sink again down through the white roots, down—to a saloon back of the railroad switch where they have that girl, you know, the one that should have been Venus by the lust that's in her. They've got her down there among the railroad men. A crusade couldn't rescue her. (XVI.2)

As Williams's note explains, Kora here is a "*weak minded*" girl involved with so many men that no one can identify the father of her child: "*there was nothing to do but to declare the child a common bastard and send the girl about her business. Her mother took her in.*" The law is a part of limbo and cannot help: "A crusade couldn't rescue her." The reunion with the mother does not help either; the "*brat*" dies in a year, and eventually the police demand "*a marriage which relieved the mother of her burden*" but that may not help the girl since the husband, a "*young roaming loafer,*" sounds like another Larry Donovan (XVI.2). The tale offers no enduring connection between mother and daughter, no promise of useful fertility or spiritual immortality; it also presents women, especially women under the influence of other women, as having no intellectual dimension ("her mother left no place for a brain to grow"). Yet Williams's own comments make it clear that Kora is an aspect of his heart, his self. She is the stupid, suffering, irresponsible flesh that cannot be permanently rescued by doctors, police, marriage, or mother love, and that is, nevertheless, the sole source of beauty.

"Where does this downhill turn up again?" (XX.1). *Kora in Hell* is really about the physical body: the torment of being trapped in its ailments, desires, and traumas; the ecstasy, the dancing energy, that comes of so embracing one's

⁴ On syphilis and insanity, see V.3, XIV.3, XXIV.2; on sexual violence, see VI.2 ("Oh quarrel whether 'twas Pope Clement raped Persephone"), XVI.1–2.

imprisonment in the flesh that one is entirely present within it, neither denying the torment nor dominated by it. The fallen woman (or Persephone) embodies the state of torment here,⁵ the dancing satyr (or Dionysos) the ecstasy; each depends on the other for its full realization, so it would not be an exaggeration to say that the text gestures toward a sacred marriage between the two. At the opening, Williams declares, “[H]ere is pennyroyal if one knows to use it” (I.1); according to Frazer, it was a “gruel of barley-meal and water, flavoured with pennyroyal, which the initiates at Eleusis drank as a solemn form of communion” with the corn goddess (*Spirits of the Corn* 161).⁶ Williams seems to imply that the text will shadow forth the process ritualized in the Eleusinian Mysteries, which, again according to Frazer, would include a sacred marriage consummated symbolically rather than physically (*The Magic Art* 138–40). Like Hardy, Williams sees ancient ritual as ceremonially representing the ordinary processes of life.

The imagination grasps the sordid, the horrible, as it is, and wills happiness to spring from it—the happiness of embracing the horror and tearing it up from the underworld of fact to make it part of honest art’s frenzied dance (II.3, XIV.3). Williams’s “philosophy of disease ... is a stern dance” (XXIV.2), drawn from the vision popularized by Frazer, Harrison, and Murray—the vision of ritual dancing, informed by primitive, Dionysiac energies. Williams tries to site modern literature not at the sophisticated and frozen end of cultural evolution but at a much earlier stage—or, to put it another way, he resists with all his might the idea that modern urban culture must be alienated from primeval vitality, that a clear-minded reckoning of life’s wretchedness necessarily concludes in pessimism. In a clever reversal of the usual conceit that the body is the mind’s garment, Williams suggests that the body’s dance leaves the “mind in tatters,” rips the shrouding mind apart (XIV.3). The incoherent fragments that make up the text are tatters through which the anguish and joy of the body are glimpsed whole: “Nothing is any pleasure but misery and brokenness. This is the only up-cadence. This is where the secret rolls over and opens its eyes” (XIV.3). As Williams insisted in a hostile review of works by Aldington, Lawrence, and others, “Poetry is ... an assertion: I am here today in the midst of living hell! I equal to any hell ...” (“Four Foreigners” 38). So Nietzsche celebrates a “barbaric” Dionysiac art exposing the “base of suffering” on which all art rests, the “delight born of pain” (*Birth of Tragedy* 34, 35).

Kora in Hell could be seen as Williams’s declaration of independence from his domineering friend and mentor, Ezra Pound (Witemeyer 5). The two poets had been significant presences in one another’s lives since college; Pound dedicated *Ripostes* to Williams, subjoining the Propertian line, “Quos ego Persephonae

⁵ As Friedman puts it, *Kora in Hell* “frequently resorts to woman’s historical body to represent disease and man’s imagination of pure woman to represent hope” (400n50). In his Kristevan study, Palattella argues that Williams sees “the female subject’s body as the primary and natural site of loss and absence” and that “restoration of the male body depends on contacting through maternity a literal language of abjection” (23, 30).

⁶ Pennyroyal is an abortifacient, so this reference is also significant to the text’s politics of fecundity (Holbo 17).

maxima dona feram" (*Personae* 57)⁷; Williams said that he owed to Pound the title of *Kora in Hell* (*Imaginations* 3–4). Throughout the war, Pound and Williams had been closely engaged in a "creative dialogue" (Witemeyer 4). Yet in the prologue to *Kora in Hell*, Williams argued that Pound, along with such other expatriates as H.D. and T.S. Eliot, was no longer truly American, that he now represented a cosmopolitan tradition of verse alien to American culture. Williams would go on using Poundian myth and metaphor, but his style and his ecstatically quotidian vision were now dramatically opposed to Pound's.

Their disagreement was to deepen. A year after *Kora in Hell* appeared, Pound was guiding T.S. Eliot through the crucial revision of *The Waste Land*, which appeared, dedicated to Pound, the following year (1922). Like *Kora in Hell*, *The Waste Land* expressed psychological, cultural, and social fragmentation through the juxtaposition of different modes—lyrical, satirical, prophetic, conversational; as in the earlier text, too, the fragments were bound together by a system of mythological allusion, by evocations of the fallen woman and the anguished urban landscape, underpinned by hints of ancient fertility cults. Like Williams, Eliot evoked an urban limbo, a squalid and flowerless underworld. Yet for Williams, *The Waste Land* was shattering: "It wiped out our world as if an atom bomb had been dropped Eliot had turned his back on the possibility of reviving my world" (*Autobiography* 174).

Williams never forgave Eliot. In 1933 he warned a promising young writer, influenced by the expatriate's work, "to come to life if he wanted me to help him and to get off Eliot as soon as he could" (Witemeyer 135).⁸ For in Eliot's "Unreal City," there is no Persephone to rise from the "dead land," though spring comes cruelly to breed lilacs; there is no enraged and questing Demeter, though there is a neurotic, increasingly desperate wife without aim or hope or fulfillment; there is no dancing satyr, only a pedestrian whoremonger for whom intercourse is not connection: "His vanity requires no response" (*Complete Poems* 37, 41–2, 44).⁹ Both reproduction itself and the repudiation of fertility seem to threaten women's health (Lil "nearly died of young George," but her abortion has left her sickly and "antique" [156, 160]); what place can there be here for a principle of fecundity? The rape haunting the poem seems only one more force fragmenting the mind or minds inhabiting the desperate city (203–6). There is no attempt to deal with rape as a specific social phenomenon that could be prevented or punished, and no anger or articulate comment about it seems conceivable: "I made no comment ... I can connect / Nothing with nothing" (299–302). This underworld is peopled with purposeless shades, among whom the readers must number themselves (62–76).

⁷ Pound later translated this line, rather loosely: "Which I take, my not unworthy gift, to Persephone" (*Personae* 219).

⁸ Two years later, Williams went so far as to call Eliot a "pot of addled ewe's snot" (Witemeyer 165). Throughout their correspondence from 1923 on, Williams frequently attacked Pound for befriending and supporting Eliot, even when Pound was in St. Elizabeth's Hospital (see, for instance, his letter of 7/8/46, Witemeyer 229).

⁹ Future references to this text will be by line number.

Most appallingly, to Williams, Eliot “gave the poem back to the academics,” frustrating for a generation Williams’s ambition to develop a poetry vitally rooted in the rhythms of American speech and in “local conditions” (*Autobiography* 146). In *The Waste Land*, language and poetry are fragments shored against the ruins of culture. They are hysterical appeals, ironic and debased echoes of a once-vital tradition; they now illuminate chiefly by their incapacities (*Waste Land* 100–103, 112–13, 431).¹⁰ Challenging the value and significance of words much as Swinburne’s Proserpine poems had done, *The Waste Land* seemed to Williams to return modern culture to the hopeless underworld from which it had begun to emerge. Eliot’s formidable text became so well known that other writers of the period were henceforth forced to employ his terms even when they were challenging his vision. In Edith Sitwell’s early writings, “Hell’s empty street” (“Mandoline,” *Collected Poems* 5) echoes with “the moronic cackling of the 1920’s over ruin” (“Some Notes on My Own Poetry,” *Collected Poems* xix); a year after publication of *The Waste Land*, her Beelzebub waits at “the hotel in Hell / Where Proserpine first fell,” but the energy of the Victorian era seems to have lapsed permanently, and nobody responds to Beelzebub’s calls (“Sir Beelzebub” [1923], *Collected Poems* 156). This wasteland clinks, clanks, and tinkles with rapid, jazzy syncopation, yet is still purposeless, still hopeless or all but hopeless. More tellingly, H.D. in *Palimpsest* (1926) refers to the “post-war Limbo” of London (166), and Pound in a 1932 letter to William Drummond writes of his own great epic of Persephone: “The hell cantos are specifically LONDON, the state of English mind in 1919 and 1920” (*Letters* 320). The imagists were determined to emerge from and to transform the deadly underworld, the desolation of modern urban culture. Yet was any ascent possible? And how might it be achieved?

The Pagan Torches: D.H. Lawrence and the Double Hades

wonderful are the hellish experiences,

Orphic, delicate

Dionysos of the Underworld.

—D.H. Lawrence, “Medlars and Sorb-Apples” (*Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, 1923; *Complete Poems* 1:280)

Even before publication of *The Waste Land*, D.H. Lawrence had formulated the issue rather differently. At the very beginning of the 1920s, as we shall see, Lawrence was developing the view that what was needed was a descent to a richly vital underworld, the underworld of body and blood and of the animal unconscious. This would be followed by an ascent, a revitalizing energy and enjoyment of life, a bringing to light of the lovely truths of hell—but the ascent would no more leave

¹⁰ By contrast, in *Kora in Hell*, language is fallen, but poetry redeems the word by renouncing the ideal and embracing the ruck (Holbo 21–3), just as the psyche redeems the hell of modern society by embracing it.

the underworld behind than a flower leaves behind its roots. Lawrence's revisions of the Persephone myth involved a complete revaluation of the underworld and the descent to it: both might be as positive as they were terrifying.

Yet no more than anyone else could Lawrence ignore the power and popularity of *The Waste Land*. In 1922 Eliot's desolate urban underworld, as a cultural metaphor instantly embraced by Western society, formed what might have seemed an overwhelming rival to Lawrence's still tentative concept of an underworld darkly glowing with vital energies. Lawrence met Eliot's challenge with a swift, inspired solution: he co-opted Eliot's underworld and used it as a foil for his own. From 1923 on, Lawrence's major novels include not one but two underworlds: one grey, irremediably diseased spiritually and emotionally, cut off from the vital energies of the physical world; the other, dark but fecund, with all the vital energies lost to the first. And there is a king for each underworld: one sterile, oversophisticated, emotionally dead, a Fisher King beyond healing; the other, a Dionysos-Dis—transfigurative, quickening, and intensely sexual. The female protagonist—necessarily a Persephone figure, associated with flowers and spring—passes from the power of the sterile Hades through a process that regenerates both her and the Dionysian Hades figure; her progress becomes a model for the modern psyche. We too can pass from the grey world of an Eliotian Proserpine, a goddess of despair and accidie, into the living world of a revived and reviving Persephone.

In surprising and influential ways, Lawrence's approach to Persephone adapts the tradition developed by freethinkers like Swinburne and Hardy.¹¹ Lawrence repeatedly quotes Swinburne's Proserpine poems, for instance, in "The Ladybird" (1923; *The Fox, The Captain's Doll, The Ladybird* 188.12), *Quetzalcoatl* (1923; 337), and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928; 87, 88). Yet it is Hardy's double Hades, Alec and Angel, who may well have inspired Lawrence's brilliant solution to the problem posed by *The Waste Land*. In *The Study of Thomas Hardy* (composed 1914, first published entire in 1936), Lawrence shows how Alec and Angel complement one another as destroyers, so that through their failings the protagonists of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* are "all as good as dead" (*Phoenix* 488). In Lawrence's fiction, the image of the male consort as belonging to a world of death and drawing his partner into that world rapidly mutates into the image of the male as Dis, Aïdes, or Hades. Yet he establishes a concept of the double underworld before he begins developing his vision of the double Hades effectively.

The concept of two contrasting underworlds seems to have been first conceived in a letter Lawrence wrote, at white heat, in 1917. Cecil Gray had accused Lawrence of encouraging his circle of female intimates (H.D. included) to depend on and worship him, as if he were Dionysos or Adonis. Lawrence replied, characteristically, with a counterattack:

¹¹ Lawrence's treatment of the myth has been explored often, but rarely in the context of the literary tradition discussed here (see Hyde 99–120; Viinikka 74–96; Dennis Jackson 128–44, 130–31, and 144n5; Sandra Gilbert 130–61; and Ford 26–60).

It seems to me there is a whole world of knowledge to forsake, a new, deeper, lower one to *entamer* [broach, penetrate] And my “women”, Esther Andrews, Hilda Aldington etc, represent . . . the threshold of a new world, or underworld, of knowledge and being.—And the Hebridean Songs, which represent you . . . in this, are songs of the damned: that is, songs of those who inhabit an underworld . . . never to be made open and whole. And you would like us all to inhabit a suggestive underworld which is never revealed . . . , only intimated, only felt between the initiated You want an emotional sensuous underworld . . . : my “women” want an ecstatic subtly-intellectual underworld, like the Greeks—Orphicism (*Letters* 3:180)¹²

In this letter we can see Lawrence’s ideas forming. There is an underworld that is emotional and sensuous but dishonest; it symbolizes an old way of being, elitist and decadent. And there is a new, vigorous underworld, coming into being through the actions and lives of Lawrence’s intimate circle, that is somehow Orphic. Harrison had argued that Orphicism embodied a yearning for a “perfect purity” of soul that would unite the worshipper with the divinity and make the worshipper himself—or herself—the divine Bacchos; in the “mysticized” sacred marriage (one of the two Orphic Mysteries she asserts were certainly practised at Eleusis), this “*union with the divine*” was achieved (*Prolegomena* 477, 494, 534, 545, 563; emphasis Harrison’s). Lawrence’s letter, then, seems to imply that his relationship with H.D., Esther Andrews, and other women was spiritually rather than sexually ecstatic, that they were looking for a religious illumination and healing, and that this “new world, or underworld, of knowledge and being,” was of the depths. The letter raises more questions than it answers, and Lawrence worked hard to develop his views further, in two little-known works at the beginning of the 1920s.

For Lawrence, the vitalizing underworld is the unconscious—in a very particular sense, which he was defining and elaborating through the 1920s. In his idiosyncratic long essay, *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (1921), he rejects Freud’s vision of the unconscious as that which the consciousness has repressed, “the inverted reflection of our ideal consciousness”; the “Freudian unconscious” is a “sack of horrors,” “the cellar in which the mind keeps its bastard spawn.” By contrast, the “true unconscious” is “the well-head, the fountain” of freedom and life: “We must discover, if we can, the true unconscious, where our life bubbles up in us, prior to any mentality.” We must discover “the spontaneous origin from which it behooves us to live” (4–5, 9, 13).

Lawrence does not here identify this “true unconscious” or space of “spontaneous origin” with the classical underworld. Yet in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922), he does imply that there is a “death-realm of the afterwards” with which we, the living, are indissolubly and actively connected “every moment of our lives” (193), and he presents as a model for us the tree of life that “thrust[s] himself [sic] tremendously down to the middle earth, where dead men sink in darkness” and draws power from that dark realm up into the world of light (83). In Lawrence’s poetry and fiction

¹² Gray was to become H.D.’s lover, briefly, a few months later.

from this period on, the "true unconscious" and the "death-realm" become the domain of the vital Hades-Dionysos, the dying and quickening god.

Urgently, he rewrites his myth of regeneration again and again, reluctantly admitting that the male requires revitalization as desperately as the female. It is at this point that he evolves his own version of the double Hades, both in response to the problem posed by the ascendancy of Eliot's underworld and as a crucial tool in his articulation of his need. Crucial texts in this process include *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in its first and third versions. In the first version (composed 1926–27), Connie's lordly husband Clifford is the rapist Hades, gripping her hand "as if it were some trophy he would carry off to the other side the grave" (*First Lady Chatterley* 4). He is physically disabled, but more importantly he is emotionally disconnected from every other living being, "limited entirely to himself ... as it were cut off from the breathing contact of the living universe" (37). His sexual impotence is among other things a metaphor for this more terrible cultural malaise, which is found, Lawrence points out, even among the sexually vigorous Paris boulevardiers, "men, like creatures roving restlessly in Hades, in a sort of afterlife, seeking for something in a woman that they had really ceased to want" (117–18). To be emotionally disconnected from one's own physical desires is to lose the fullness and sacredness of physical life and to slide into Eliot's underworld, the wasteland of the unreal city.

It is when Clifford's wife, Connie, "a real quiet maiden," is gathering spring flowers that she meets her true Hades figure, Parkin, by the tomb-like "little stone house with a grey slate roof, at the foot of the slope where the daffodils grew" (*First Lady Chatterley* 1, 25). In her love affair she thinks of Swinburne's line, "When the hounds of spring are on winter's traces" (*Atalanta in Calydon* 65) and knows herself for "an escaping Persephone, Proserpine," eager to be "caught by the wild hound of Pluto," the life-giving Hades: "It is he," Connie reflects, "who connects me up with real life" (*First Lady Chatterley* 62, 67).

In the 1928 *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, similar points are made more subtly. Urged to go looking at "the daffs behind the keeper's cottage," Connie is reminded of the gamekeeper—now called Mellors—and "his thin, white body, like a lonely pistil of an invisible flower ... 'Pale beyond porch and portal' ... the thing to do was to pass the porches and the portals" (the quotation is of course from Swinburne's "The Garden of Proserpine") (*Lady Chatterley's Lover* 87). Mellors is identified with the narcissus of the Hymn to Demeter and with Persephone herself, yet Connie is also Persephone: "'The world has grown pale with thy breath.' But it was the breath of Persephone, this time; she was out of hell on a cold morning" (88; the misquotation is from Swinburne's "Hymn to Proserpine"). The breath of the goddess turns the world not grey with a joyless Christianity but pale with the delicate pallor of the windflowers or a naked white body; the breath of the goddess infuses the woods with life and beauty, and the psyche with regenerative sexual and spiritual energy:

All her self felt alive, and in motion, like the woods in spring. She could not but feel that a new breath had swept into her body from the man, and that she was like a forest sighing with a new, soft wind, sighing and moving unspoken

into bud. All her body felt like the dark interlacing of the boughs of an oak wood, softly humming in a wind ... with the myriad ... unfolding of buds “Because I was willing,” she said in a muse She, deep within the sacred and sensitive wood, was filled with the pure communication of the other man (*First Lady Chatterley* 36)

This gentle transformation of Frazer’s famous opening sequence in *The Golden Bough* appropriates the sacred grove to the mystery of connection; the civilized Clifford, reading Racine, is emphatically outside this mystery, part of a pack of “barbarous, disconnected savages ... outside of the wood” (36). The vital ritual is not the slaying of the old by the new priest but the woman’s recognition, “in the vast interlaced intricacy of the forest of her body,” that the true priest at once embodies and reawakens the inspiring divinity who belongs in the grove (36). Clifford is only the “*Abgott*,” “the god that had fallen and become an idol” (37). The relationship between Connie and Parkin is that “holy thing, a living, flowing, intangible contact” (228).

This richly sensual contact is a long way from Wordsworth’s ideal of connection through the Mysteries, but the emphasis on connection remains, and this new version of pagan holiness is sharply differentiated from other forms of religion. Like Basil in “The Ladybird,” Clifford offers to “worship” his wife, but—unlike Basil’s wife, who is merely dissatisfied by this approach—Connie is repelled and disgusted by the suggestion (225–7). In worshipping, in being worshipped, lies separation; the sacred contact is lost:

But what thing dost thou now,
Looking Godward, to cry
“I am I, thou art thou,
I am low, thou art high”?
(Swinburne, “Hertha” 31–4, *Poems* 2:73)

Lawrence contributes to that long shift of spiritual energy from transcendent religion—the worship of an immortal god, set apart—toward a spirituality based on experienced immanence. The true Hades desires not worship but intimacy; the authentic self, which constitutes the true power of a Persephone, Dionysos, or Dis, derives from the “true unconscious,” the deep ground of being that is Hades’ domain but that woman reveals to man, man to woman. Persephone represents the modern psyche who must be released from her false Hades (often her legal spouse) by her true Hades, who meets her in the sacred marriage. This pattern inverts the Christian narrative employed in Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, where the Red Cross Knight must be released from his bondage to Duessa and espoused to Una. For Lawrence, the way of salvation is not upward to the transcendent but downward to the immanent, the body, the physical world, and the reality of death—the way leads not out of sin to renewal through grace, but rather out of disconnection and depression to connection with the ground of being. Lawrence provides, in short, a religious vision that reverses the form of Christianity most familiar to him.

The Other Side of Styx: Lost Daughters, Strong Lovers in Clarke, Bradley, and H.D.

There was another side and this was the great discovery.

—H.D., *Asphodel* 181 (emphasis H.D.'s)

To say "I am Kora" is a statement made possible—and meaningful—by the nineteenth-century mythographers and poets who articulated Koré's dynamism and the primacy of the chthonian deities, the need for deities who could die, as well as the power and meaning of the Mystery religions. To say "I am Kora" is to define the psyche as something that goes through a cyclic process of losing and regaining, unmaking and remaking itself; it is also a declarative statement of the capacity and will to heal, to revive. The transgender implications of such a statement on male lips have been hidden by the sexist conventions of mystical expression within patriarchal societies, since, in both Judeo-Christian and classical traditions, the psyche is commonly figured as female and the overwhelming divine power to be encountered is figured as male. The strategy of identification with a goddess releases the male author from the mental fetters of our sexual categories but at the same time makes it easy for him to elide the female; far more than the male Victorians, male Modernists tend to ignore or dismiss the bond between Persephone and Demeter, the need to discover ways of psychologically surviving rape and kidnap, and the subjective experience of a woman forcibly estranged from female community. Female Modernists, on the other hand, explore these issues and more: the destructive impulses built into the mother-daughter relationship within a patriarchal system; women's capacity to invent new emotional structures, new ways of coping with violence; and women's need to reconstruct their own patterns of connection.

While Ingelow and Greenwell explored marriage as an imprisonment that disconnected the bride from her mother, and later poets at the turn of the century considered the increasing tensions between mother and daughter as the fruit of Persephone's own growth in tragic experience, female Modernist poets present women's conventional social roles as an underworld that inhibits growth. It is now the escape from the underworld that offers the only possibility for real development, yet this escape cannot be achieved in the traditional way, with the mother manipulating the powers of fertility to bend the male gods to her will. New modes of escape, new ways of being Persephone, are imperative for a twentieth-century Koré; above all, women's internal, deeply emotional commitment to convention must be unmade if Persephone is to live again. In Amy Key Clarke's *Persephone*, it is easier for Demeter to storm hell than for her or her daughter to change their habits of self-sacrifice; in "Pomegranates," Katharine Bradley furiously rejects Proserpine's attempt to pass on her own entrapment and dismisses a whole mythology of female immolation. In her autobiographical novels, H.D. conflates Eleusis with the underworld and shows not Demeter rescuing Persephone but two Persephones saving and transforming one another; the female self is made whole, indeed is sacralized, within a new kind of female community.

In *Persephone: A Masque* (1925), Amy Key Clarke seems more deeply aware of the cross currents and gendered tensions in ancient and nineteenth-century

interpretations of the Persephone myth than any other writer mentioned in this book (with the exception, perhaps, of Edith Wharton).¹³ The first two scenes devastatingly undermine Tennyson's Christian vision of spiritual progress and dismiss the promise of immortality as a lie; the last scene, filled with the tension created when a daughter's intellectual and moral development leads her away from the mother, recalls the female Victorian tradition of poetry about Persephone as the opening scenes recall the male tradition. Deliberately or involuntarily, both goddesses trade a self-indulgent but happy independence for the manipulations, deceits, and psychological pressures of the marriage market; they triumph over these forces only to fall prey to their own pity for the miserable.

Clarke's first two scenes seem to offer the last word on the long debate over immortality. Demeter ambitiously hopes to marry her daughter to Zeus; vowing ambiguously that Persephone will indeed win "royalty and endless reign," Hermes tricks the mother into leaving Persephone "Unguarded and exposed" and makes the girl queen of hell rather than of heaven (19, 20, 31). Enraged when she discovers the deceit, Demeter decides to "Scatter all signs of [her] allegiance, paid / To one whom [she had] thought Saviour!" (34). She flings away her own Olympian sceptre and crown, crying, "Off, you gauds!" and trampling on them; instead, she now claims her own innate royalty in "bare motherhood" (34). It is not hard to see in this remarkable passage a repudiation of Christianity's promises that the soul will be the bride of Christ—promises which by the avant-garde of the 1920s are seen to be false, hollow, and manipulative. We are invited to worship a divinity who is no longer Olympian, not in any way transcendent: a god who is merely human.

At the end of the scene, "crowned and sceptred with [her] grief," Demeter goes down to the underworld herself and brings her daughter back (34–5). Clarke is the first English writer I know to show Demeter descending into the underworld to recover her child, as the Babylonian Ishtar had gone into the underworld to recover her lover Tammuz. Mary Shelley's Ceres merely threatens to invade Pluto's kingdom; Clarke's Demeter does it and succeeds. Yet, as in Wharton, Persephone returns to life with only a short burst of delight in the upper world; her chief loyalty now is to the underworld, and she returns, disrupting by her own choice the bond between mother and daughter.

Where Wharton's Persephone is cold and hostile to her mother, however, Clarke's Persephone is a figure of compassion. Soft-hearted to Dis during their first colloquy, on her return from the underworld she is at first silent and depressed, overwhelmed by her memory of "the angry shapes / Of sorrow, loneliness, and crowned despair"; when Hermes comes reminding her of her promise to cleave to Dis, she agrees to return not because of her oath but out of "love, grief, pity," believing she can lighten the darkness of those who must stay in the underworld (41, 47, 48). Demeter also devotes herself to supporting the "woeful race of man," the "poor houseless wretch" of the upper world (50, 49). Echoes of *King Lear* III.iv.28–30 and 108 may imply that there is a noble madness in these decisions.

¹³ Clarke may have actually read Shelley's *Proserpine* (which was finally published in book form in 1922, 90 years after its first appearance in a more ephemeral form, and three years before Clarke's play was published).

The new labours of the goddesses are meaningful, even if Persephone does sound rather like an upper-class do-gooder, stunned by her first perception of the misery of the world and then inspired by liberal guilt to run off and join the wretched. Both goddesses now see beyond the institution of marriage to a wider world in which they can give real—though limited—help to the miserable.

Yet their social work seems too much like a substitute for the lives and the living connection that Persephone denies her mother and herself when she emerges from the underworld only to force herself back into it. All that the great goddesses do for others seems not to give them the joy of a genuine vocation, nor can they free themselves or their beneficiaries from the harsh system controlled by Zeus and Hades. Most disturbingly, the selflessness inculcated in women by the patriarchal institution of marriage endures even when women demonstrably have the power to resist the institution; treated as though their selves were of no value or importance, even strong women learn to subordinate themselves, to a cause if not to an institution—in any case, to the benefit of others. Both goddesses seem self-doomed to an existence without erotic or revolutionary energy, without pleasure or power—a woman's underworld. This Persephone will comfort only those in the dark, acting out a traditional version of femininity and enduring the frustrations of those who nurture the damaged without being able to change the damaging system.

For certain female writers in the early twentieth century, Persephone represents a figure of feminine disempowerment; to reject her might be one way of empowering oneself. In November 1911, Katharine Bradley learned that the woman she loved—her niece Edith Cooper, the other half of their literary persona, "Michael Field,"—had developed cancer. Bradley's early reaction to this grief is expressed in her lyric "Pomegranates" which was drafted in 1911 but published only in 1936, when both Bradley and Cooper were dead. In this poem, Bradley begins by expressing an invitation to Proserpine as the goddess of vegetation and death; the lovers, united under the pronouns "us" and "we," embrace a vision of the goddess whose lovely fruitfulness entails a turning from Eros to Thanatos, a rejection of sexual desire for the sake of the sad yet vivid wisdom of the underworld:

Proserpine, Proserpine,
 Give us of lovely stems,
 Give us your fruit—
 We with pomegranates will crown our bowers,
 So feel the flowers,
 So fails desire—
 So your fruit is ruddy as a fire. ("Pomegranates" 1–7)

The fruit on one hand is "lovely" and "ruddy," a crowning glory; the poetry that Proserpine's wisdom inspires is beautiful and fascinating. Yet it is specifically deadening as well; when Proserpine took the pomegranate and ate a part of it, she ensured that she would never completely escape the world of death, and even as the speakers "feel the [pomegranate] flowers," the desire between them fails. Alison Hennegan correctly interprets this passage as representing "*the dying down and away of sexual desire in one partner when serious illness ... strikes*" (Hennegan 331).

Yet Hennegan incorrectly interprets the pomegranates themselves as representing desire; these fruits of death are precisely what stop desire, and in the second stanza, as the beloved woman realizes her sickness, she rejects the pomegranate and claims for her desire “an eternity of love and years”:

Winter again, how quick,
 Comes! and my loved is sick:
 ‘Proserpine’.
 Shuddering she pleads ‘I do not want
 The pomegranate’—
 Desire in tears
 Claims an eternity of love and years. (“Pomegranates” 8–14)

The “loved,” then, resists Proserpine’s attempt to pass on to her the damage that Pluto had formerly done to Proserpine—she resists the pomegranate and recognizes the devastating effects of accepting death’s fruit. And, at this stage, the speaker of the poem steps in proudly not only as a separate subject but as a rival of the death goddess, one who can dismantle the myth of Proserpine and its false glamour, one who can displace the misleading ruddiness of the pomegranate with the fiery intensity of her own living passion:

O Love, thy voice! . . . My breath
 Warm on thee startles Death.
 Mythology
 Shrivels as a ghost, beholding me
 My lips, O Sweet,
 To thine the heat,
 Stir of coals, immortal cherishing! (15–21)

“My breath,” “My lips,” “me”—this is the joyous egoism of the lover who believes in her power to regenerate, to heal, or even in death to persist and forever cherish the warmth of the love between the two women. Proserpine is the mythic victim who tries to reproduce her own victimization and offers us a role like her own, a role of endangerment and entrapment; such “Mythology” must shrivel, the author hopes, before the love between two women.

A similar pattern, achieved with great difficulty over a long period, can be seen in H.D.’s autobiographical novels *Her* and *Asphodel* (1927, 1928). Mythology becomes the means by which women’s separations are articulated; to dismiss mythology—or to remake it differently?—is to make possible the recreation of authentic selves and their development in new patterns of intimacy. Similarly, in “Demeter” (1917), H.D. sweeps aside the whole apparatus of ancient ritual, though she simultaneously becomes one of the first poets to set Demeter “in a context of actual worship . . . add[ing] details which . . . enhance the ritual element” (Swan 45):

Men, fires, feasts,
 steps of temple, fore-stone, lintel,
 step of white altar, fire and after-fire,
 slaughter before,

fragment of burnt meat,
 deep mystery,
 (men, fires, feasts, temple steps)—useless. (111)¹⁴

H.D. not only read Frazer, Murray, and Harrison¹⁵ but also developed at least the beginnings of a feminist critique of anthropology as it was practised in her day and of literature as it was affected by a patriarchal anthropology. Eileen Gregory has demonstrated in depth H.D.'s affinities with Harrison: their shared emphasis on ecstasy and ritual, on "daimonic presences," on "multiple images of the Korai" and a matriarchal female deity "within the fragmented images of the hellenic Korai"; above all, Harrison and H.D. both stress the centrality of the sacred marriage and the sacred birth in Eleusinian worship, where the great mother, who is also the sacred virgin, takes Dionysos as son-consort (Gregory 112, 116, 119). I would add that both Harrison and H.D. present women as makers of myth. H.D. also, however, sees that the system of male domination of which the classical Mysteries were inevitably part provides the foundation for patriarchy in her own day; she opposes the general habit, in writings about early religion, of viewing all things through a masculinist perspective, and she is grimly fascinated by the degree to which women's collusion with these tendencies perpetuates their own oppression.

It is in her autobiographical fictions (rarely published in her own day) that H.D. predominantly explores Eleusinian myth and ritual; her poems and nonfictional prose use both abundantly, but in doing so they tend to produce wildly original syncretic creations rather than to engage with or retell this single myth in detail. H.D. in fact uses the myth of Persephone almost exclusively to explore disturbing issues—depression, incest, and emotional abuse. The fictions are to some extent romans à clef in that the heroines' careers have many parallels with H.D.'s, and most characters are based on figures in H.D.'s own life: Carl and Eugenia Gart are based on her parents, George Lowndes on Ezra Pound, Fayne Rabb on Frances Josepha Gregg, Jerrold Darrington on H.D.'s husband (Richard Aldington); Beryl de Rothfeldt on Bryher (Winifred Ellerman); but for our purposes what matters is the mythic pattern into which she shapes the characters' relationships.

Her (composed in 1927 and first published as *HERmione* in 1981) is less a novel than a sequence of dialogues, debates, and quarrels in which each protagonist endlessly attempts to mythify and define the others. In this world of impassioned voices, it is striking that "Eleusinian" becomes a code word for a particular version

¹⁴ The poem was composed in 1917 but is ascribed in *Collected Poems to Hymen* (1921); see 99. Later on, H.D. says much of the Mysteries, but she does not see them as embodying a world of ritual separate from her own civilization; rather, they form a model for her own occult adumbrations of a new religion.

¹⁵ Gregory devotes a chapter to the "uncanny parallelism" between Harrison and H.D. (110, and see 108–25 *passim*). Duncan has claimed that H.D. did not know Harrison's work "in the early years," but this does imply that she came to know it later. See Gregory 272n6 and Duncan 29. Gregory also discusses H.D.'s reading in Frazer (109) and Gilbert Murray (273nn10, 11).

of femininity: conventional, depressive, and strikingly focused on fertility. Eugenia and her sister Lillian share the procreative imperative of Wharton's Demeter: they are "Eleusinian. Life to them means simply more life. They have justified themselves in having children" (179; see also 31).¹⁶ They are Eleusinian, too, in being venerable; Eugenia's daughter, Her, thinks of her mother: "one should sing hymns of worship to her, powerful, powerless, all-powerful" (81). The mother has no power to save her daughter and no power within her marriage, yet she has extraordinary power to define the terms that seem to shape and distort Her's life: "Demeter ... hanging little horns of plenty on the [Christmas] tree It was right. Oh, she's so horribly right. Then what is wrong with everything?" (80). Eugenia is a disturbing character, brooding over a stillborn girl and falling into depressive withdrawals at erratic intervals: "Hermione could not keep track of what she called in her childhood Eugenia's 'still days'" (21). Like Demeter, Eugenia has found her power in the sphere of fertility bitterly challenged by the loss of her child; this Eleusinian mother sits in the dark "like a great moth," damping and damaging her surviving daughter, while the detached "Athenian" father, Carl Gart, seems to offer an enkindling hope: Her's "spirit snuffed out by Eugenia flamed and flared by Gart" (81).

For the most part, Eugenia speaks for the forces of convention, yet during a ferocious storm, the mother's words take on quite a different significance as she retells the tale of Her's birth and of the Demeter-like figure who acted toward Eugenia then as nurse, midwife, and mother (89). In this tale of one woman supporting another, one woman birthing another, "[w]ords of Eugenia had more power than textbooks, than geometry, than all of Carl Gart Demeter (such a dear nurse) lifting the tired shoulders of a young Eugenia ... had driven the raging storm back ... had saved them from the numbers" (89–90). Yet when Her tries to revive this moment of communion and power with her mother, Eugenia reverts to the language of convention, talking of good breeding, inanely mocking or ignoring the Swinburne poems that mean so much to Her, and—most significantly—quoting the English opinion that calling the autumn "fall" is funny (121–6). The American word "fall" in this sense serendipitously suggests Persephone's fall, but Eugenia refuses to acknowledge her own or her daughter's recurrent collapses. At a crucial moment, staring at her mother's face, Her thinks that only a part of Eugenia appears and the rest is blurred, nothingness:

¹⁶ Friedman reproduces a page of H.D.'s typescript of *Her* that includes cancelled matricidal fantasies vaguely reminiscent of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "The Juniper Tree": "~~If I hurl a pumpkin at Eugenia her head will roll off~~" (typescript 2, p. xvi of unnumbered pages between 430 and 431). Friedman's reading of the Demeter-Kôre romance in *Her* is more positive than my own: "As wife, Eugenia is the powerless Demeter ... [b]ut, as artist, Eugenia is the powerful Demeter who helps to 'lift' her daughter out of the underworld of spiritual paralysis" (126). Yet, as late as 23 August 1924, H.D. wrote in a letter to Bryher of her mother's impact as "a constant wearing away of every power of resistance," as if, says Friedman, "her mother personified the parental superego of conventional feminine respectability" (223; see also 226). Eugenia, I would argue, represents not just a social role model but the madness, the collapse of the self, that for H.D. this role would entail.

the eyes are violets, the nose is a nose from an El[e]usinian frieze above an altar.
The head is set right. But the whole thing's marred with tea leaves. (183)

The mother's world is an underworld of willed powerlessness, stagnation in convention, depression, and erasure. It is also a world where women gradually destroy their own psychological and linguistic power; watching Eugenia and thinking too of her mother's sister Lillian, Her thinks, "'normal, unwholesome, their vocabulary gets more meager'" (177). What it is that Her wants instead—what possible alternative version of womanhood Her sees through the figure of her woman lover—is difficult to define: "'I mean,'" Her stammers to her lover Fayne, "'I see (through you) the meaning of—of—' 'Eternity?' 'No-oo—not that exactly.' 'Maternity?' 'Oh horrible—' 'Paternity?' 'Fayne—are you really still there?'" (145). As patriarchal power contains, for the women, the danger of erasure, maternal power contains the danger of being "horribly" possessed by a woman already erased. Eugenia furiously attacks the two figures who are most important to Her's development and maturation (Lowndes and Fayne), and Fayne's mother is yet more destructively possessive of her daughter, as Fayne laments: "'She would make me ill and then nurse me'" (158); "I sometimes think that mama is mad. I know I am" (186).

"[N]ot Olympian but Delphic," Fayne is a kind of mirror reflecting to Her with overwhelming power Her's hopeful yet terrible vision of womanhood (213). On one side, Fayne is a liberator: "Eugenia ..., Carl Gart and Lillian were so many leaves wrapped around the unborn butterfly. Outside a force wakened, drew Her out of Her. Call the thing Fayne Rabb" (216). Fayne recognizes Her as a potential phoenix, a prophetess; she challenges Her's "false, superimposed standards" (144, 162). In their climactic scene, when, "Pythian to Pythian, prophetess to prophetess," the lesbian lovers confront one another, Fayne recognizes the grandeur and "beauty" within Her; Her recognizes the "truth" within Fayne (177–9). If, as Keats claimed, beauty is truth, truth beauty, the two women are one, as Her thinks: "Her is Fayne. Fayne is Her. I will not let them hurt HER" (181).¹⁷

Unfortunately, the two women are one not only in their secret power but also in their tendency to lapse from and betray that power—a self-annihilation that almost becomes mutual annihilation. Fayne is eloquent, full of force, and yet only partially there—like Eugenia, but also like Her. Her challenges Fayne: "You are conscious aren't you that Fayne Rabb is nothing?" and Fayne challenges Her: "Have you no reality, no voice, no articulate self?" (145, 177). Yet Her can recover her power even if Fayne evades her own: "Fayne will not reach out, will not accept her greatness. You must bear a double sword, a double burden" (220).

"One I love, two I love, three I love" (208); Eugenia, Fayne, and Her together present a threefold portrait of womanhood. Eugenia is the conventional woman who rarely, intermittently, shows what is in her; habitually deferring to male

¹⁷ In the context of their discussion of beauty and truth, this antimetabole clearly echoes the famous conclusion of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," but it is also a very Swinburnean device. On Swinburne's antimetaboles see Louis, *Swinburne and his Gods* 30, 59, 85, 130, 135; on H.D.'s use of chiasmus and antimetabole, see Collecott 15–16.

authority, she gradually falls out of touch with her own energies. Fayne is the bohemian, apparently the opposite of the conventional woman, yet in fact a kind of mirror image of conventional femininity—the other side of the coin. Her sexual promiscuity, assertive and often aggressive speech, and constant self-celebration as the spirit of truth articulate a defiance of the older femininity, yet they cannot save her from repeated falls into an underworld of erasure very similar to Eugenia's: "... I am pure truth when I *am*." 'You so often, Fayne, aren't'" (162; emphasis H.D.'s). Her could easily become either Eugenia or Fayne, and she betrays herself often as they do, yet she embodies a possibility that women need not continue forever in their underworld, need not perpetually re-enact a psychic fall.

It is important to bear in mind that in *Her* the fall to avoid is the fall into Eleusis, into conventional motherhood, and above all into psychological erasure. The issue is still more complex in *Asphodel* (1921–22, revised 1926–27, and published in 1992), the earlier work to which *Her* is the prequel. While *Her* focuses on configurations of womanhood, *Asphodel* is concerned chiefly with the development of Her's spirituality—a mysticism that fuses Christian and pagan elements, with paganism predominant. The deep tensions associated with the Eleusinian goddesses in *Her* come to a head in *Asphodel*, where the mother appears in an extremely sinister light and the female underworld is a place of psychological collapse, psychopathic behaviour, mania, and despair. The depression and self-erasure of Eugenia's underworld in *Her* reappears in a much more extreme form as a psychic and sometimes physical self-annihilation. Shirley Thornton's suicide (inspired by the suicide of Margaret Lanier Cravens, friend to both Pound and H.D.) occupies a central position in the novel as a terrible act in which all the characters are somehow involved. Yet Her sees Fayne's decision to return to Madre (as Fayne calls her mother)—to play out Persephone's story—equally as a self-annihilation:

"... There is a door leading nowhere There is a door of cowardice and unattainment and of nullity. That is, 'yes Madre I am coming back with you and O Madre how happy we will be together.'..." (*Asphodel* 54)

Her's words to Fayne fiercely illuminate H.D.'s startling reversal of the myth. Persephone on her emergence from the underworld might well cry out, "[Y]es Madre I am coming back with you and O Madre how happy we will be together." For Her, however, the Mother's world is the underworld. The relationship between Fayne and her mother Clara, Her says, "is incest. Mothers and daughters don't sleep in the same bed. It's horrible" (*Asphodel* 53). In *Her*, Fayne has a hermetic function, guiding Her from the underworld of conventional femininity to a new role as prophetess, but in *Asphodel*, she turns her back on this function and becomes part of the female underworld herself, or so Her's furious diatribe would have it: "You are Hermes turning from the high ladder of Heaven solely to the underworld. Hermes led dead men across Styx. You are that river" (55).

"I hated Eugenia, loving her. But we can't creep back into our mothers, be born again that way. We must be born again in another way," Her declaims, urging Fayne to confront and resist her mother as Hermione has confronted and resisted

hers (51). *Asphodel* can be seen as the culmination of a tendency, present in several texts by women (Wharton's "Pomegranate Seed," Clarke's *Persephone*), to find something morally and psychologically troubling in the mother's capacity to recall her daughter. When Her calls Eugenia "cruel," Darrington replies:

"All mothers are. You mustn't take it hard. All parents are monsters of cruelty. They would rather one died in their clutches than that one winged out of it, loose They haven't the decency of hawks, no[r] the respectability of tigers. Tigers, hawks let their young loose to grow. Our parents feed on us like vampires on raw flesh You're not free of the thing really. You think you are. They'll come back and nab you." (66)

The rhythmic, extravagant frenzy of this speech articulates the anguished relationships within *Asphodel*, as Her finds with rage and terror that her romantic experience replays her experience with her parents. It is not that Eugenia or Carl Gart "nabs" Her—Her's parents never appear in this novel—but that she involuntarily perpetuates the problems that their dynamics initially created for her. We internalize an image of the all-powerful, rescuing parent and project that onto our lovers (or allow them to project it onto us) in the first flush of passion; when the parents have been noticeably needy, we also internalize a negative parental construct and allow it to suck out our vitality; then we project this succubus onto our lovers, once the first bedazzlement of infatuation has yielded to intimacy. Where a parent has in some way erased or drained our vitality, the lover initially appears as a liberator from the parental underworld but is likely eventually to appear in the role of gloomy Dis. The potently lyrical references to the Persephone myth in *Asphodel* allow us to trace this process.

The young Her at first perceives her lovers as divine figures whose power releases her from an earlier enthrallment, but then, as they reveal their neediness, she perceives them as underworld figures or as part of her own underworld. Fayne's return to the mother is a blow to Her, who thinks on recovering from this shock that she "had risen from Hell as Persephone from the underworld. She had crossed Styx" (75). Then comes a second blow: Fayne has given in to conventional femininity, has accepted compulsory heterosexuality, has married. Her experiences this not as Fayne's decision or tragedy, but as Her's own rape:

A volcanic rock shrivelled, opened, cracked, fell and hyacinths were about her, shrivelled, withered as the flowers dropped by Persephone. Riven hyacinths It was Fayne who had said one couldn't possibly marry. (75)

Her disastrously follows Fayne in this, and Her's subsequent marriage to Darrington is already in collapse when she at last becomes a mother, an experience that also rives her, divides her, in various ways. At first she perceives her pregnancy as a wholeness, a sacred madness, an ecstasy: "I am priestess, infallible, inviolate Cassandra? Madness rings me [I]nside and outside are the same, God in and out" (151–2). The landscape is "Dionysus," perceived through "several layers of mysteries" (153). In this sacred ecstasy, Her becomes for a while increasingly

confident in her femaleness, “stronger than men, men, men, men, guns” (163).¹⁸ Creating life, creating joy for herself in the midst of the ongoing war, she discovers and embraces a powerful “witch-craft” within herself and identifies herself with Morgan le Fay (166). Yet she is still entrapped by assumptions she had absorbed earlier: “Women can’t speak and clever women don’t have children. So if a clever woman does speak, she must be mad. She is mad” (113). “I gave up the stark glory of the intellect, I chose finally this thing,” she insists, but that choice has left her “in several pieces” (170). Her has let her Hellene aspects, her intellectual and aesthetic and prophetic and physical impulses, fall into abeyance, as she realizes when Beryl de Rothfeldt interrupts into her life and requires her to revive those impulses. This challenge makes Her realize that she is still in a wintry, dormant state intellectually, sexually, and as a poet: “[B]erries are almost over, frost makes a veil, the bride of God, the dead bride, Persephone veil over the bushes, over me, Persephone in Hell” (168).

The physical rapture of pregnancy is, then, only a first step toward the recovery of Her’s own vitality and sacredness. Beryl makes Her realize this much. Yet Beryl cannot save Her; Beryl has no power greater than Her’s own; Beryl can only remind Her what Her is. In the private mythology of these very private novels, unpublished during H.D.’s lifetime, Persephone can rise from the underworld of despair not through male intercession (Hermione resists very strongly the suggestion that her daughter could have a father), and certainly not through the intercession of a powerful maternal Demeter, but, instead, through the appeal of a second Koré. Beryl’s “eyes would still stare at her the other side of—the other side of—Styx. There *was* another side and this was the great discovery” (181; emphasis H.D.’s). “[B]lue eyes were working their horrible first aid and were calling, calling to something in Hermione that was lost, that was forgotten ... blue eyes called her back to war, to fight, to resist, to appeal” (183). This series of infinitives is important. Her has been passive and bewildered through much of the novel; things have happened to her, but she has not used her will often, has neither fought nor asked for help as much as she has needed to do.

Beryl’s “horrible” power, which involves sexual love, intellectual dedication, and naked, honest need, displaces the “horrible” power of maternity as Her has known it, with its unacknowledged erotic energy, its suppression or devaluation of the female intellect, and its unspoken neediness (*Her* 145, *Asphodel* 53). Maternity itself becomes a burden and vocation that the two women can divide between themselves; in the final scene of the novel, Her does ask for help, finding in Beryl a sanctuary even as she offers Beryl a lifeline that the younger woman desperately needs. Her has birthed a daughter she cannot now support; having arranged to live with Beryl, Her offers the child to Beryl to bring up:

¹⁸ “At the same time H.D. was writing *Asphodel*, Lawrence was formulating his phallic politics of salvation—regeneration through the return of the repressed phallus. H.D., in contrast, envisioned the rebirth of civilization and the self through the return of the repressed womb” (Friedman 190).

"... If you promise never more to say that you will kill yourself, ... I'm going to ask you something. I want to make a bargain with you." "Yes." ... "The little girl is not my husband's little girl I want you to promise me to grow up and take care of the little girl." (205–6)

It would be easy to be cynical about this extraordinary transaction. Her is lucky to have a rich heiress to hand who is so accommodating; but the morality of an unstable mother's handing her child over to a younger woman who seems at least equally unstable (though financially much better able than Her to support the baby) can be questioned. Yet it is important to compare this scene with the earlier tragic episode of Shirley's suicide. Then Her reflected that she "might have reached across" to Shirley and "said simply, 'I am so unhappy.' Hermione hadn't done this. Hermione had killed her" (103). What Her had failed to do with Shirley, she does now with Beryl; but, earlier, what Her had failed to do for Shirley, Beryl had done for Her, appealing desperately to Her for simple companionship: "I beg of you. I am so very lonely" (171). Beryl and Her awaken each other from different forms of self-erasure, but each woman, openly acknowledging her own need, finds she can fill the need of the other. Beryl, herself needed at last, trusted with another human life, is revived and transfigured, and her eyes become "the eyes of an eagle in a trigo triptych, ... eyes of an attendant angel on an altar" (206). In this transaction Her begins to recognize that women's needs differ, that the responsibility of raising a child—which to her is still an intolerable burden—can enlarge and empower the life of another woman.

This lover will not be Her's reflection or see Her as her own reflection. The two women and the girl now form "an unlikely holy family but a mutually supportive one" (Spoo xiii).¹⁹ By this unconventional arrangement, the two Korés save each other from their respective underworlds. Earlier, Her had feared that Beryl, learning of the illegitimate baby, "might hate her, turn against her, consider her beyond the pale," for "having so far forsaken the snow-white arcana of Pallas, so far as to fall ... fall ... fall" (176; points of ellipsis H.D.'s). Her is very much aware of her status as a fallen woman and of the melodramatic doom that, she feels, even now is subconsciously expected to crush her: "You would have had a baby in your arms and stumbled ... and there is always a river" (204). This plunge, this fall, Her associates subtly with Persephone: when Darrington threatens her with "penal servitude" if she registers the baby as his, she plunges into London streets that seem an underworld whirl of "grey ash drifting," and there she sees the daffodils that have so prominent and menacing a place in Persephone's story: "Penal servitude was daffodils in Piccadilly" (202). Yet Beryl, saved from her own suicidal plunge, manages by her words and by her spontaneous, childlike joy to undermine this whole complex of sexual shame and punishment: told that the baby is not Darrington's, Beryl says frankly, "I am so glad" (206).

The Persephone myth originally was not a tale of Koré's sexual sin, of the "fall" in the Victorian Christian sense, but, as we have seen in the chapter on Hardy and

¹⁹ See Friedman's analysis of H.D.'s novels as re-enacting "the '*fort-da*' game of maternal loss and return" (95).

Cather particularly, by H.D.'s time, the myth could be used either to reinforce or to deconstruct paralyzing anxieties about sex and fertility. For H.D., anxiety about sex was inseparable from anxieties about motherhood and madness and about the very nature of womanhood. Knowing how deeply Persephone embodied those anxieties, she could not embrace Koré as a type of regeneration as easily as did her male contemporaries. Yet the second half of *Asphodel* promises a reconciliation with Eleusis when the sacred marriage and its sequel, the childbearing, are both embraced as holy—when women do not have to “fall” into stigma and self-blame and do not have to erase themselves. In both the Mysteries and the Christian mythos, however, it is the child that is holy; in *Asphodel* the regeneration of the female self is sacralized within the two mother figures and lovers who confront each other at the end. For two women, at least, it is possible to counteract and resist the grim forces that have produced the female underworld exposed in the first half of the novel.

A woman, then, can herself be part of the underworld, as Eugenia is in depression or Fayne when she obliterates herself for her mother's sake, or she may be an individual resolutely removing herself from the underworld by constructing an alternative female community with another individual. Each woman can follow Persephone's descent or her ascent. In the same way, the myth can be turned in several ways within a given period or culture, as we have seen throughout; it is up to us to use the fluidity of the myth to free or strengthen ourselves. What the myth itself has to offer is a warning and a hope. To accept the myth as it is commonly read, to accept it as a description of what society or the family should be, is a devastating error, as H.D. powerfully demonstrates. Far better to accept the myth as an exposé of the warped power relations within society and the family and to use it as a tool to create a new social system, new patterns of emotional behaviour. Persephone cannot escape from the underworld in the traditional way, through her mother's manipulations. She can depend on no one but her peers and herself; hand in hand, the new Korés will rise to create a new spring.

Conclusion

the Eleusinian coast
must flower again
with torch
and mystery;
the lost and lovely Daughter
must arise ...

—H.D., “Choros Sequence from *Morpheus*” (1931) (*Collected Poems* 259)²⁰

For such early twentieth-century male writers as Williams and Lawrence, the ascent of Koré often meant above all the revival of the physical, in the individual and in society at large; this would bring about a joyous fertility and the awakening of a

²⁰ In this poem, the Persephone myth is only one of a variety woven into a series of meditations on love and ecstasy. The technique loosely anticipates that of H.D.'s epics.

truly pagan spirituality. Connection would become possible at the most intimate level, sensual and psychological, and bad old Christian habits like self-sacrifice, asceticism, and the repudiation of the self would fade naturally from the world. For female writers of the same period, however, these habits themselves constitute an underworld that can be escaped only by means of heroic effort exerted by an egalitarian community; Persephone is the subjectivity resisting an inimical world of convention, and if she frees herself it will be through recovering aspects of herself beyond the physical.

Yet in the great Modernist epics of the mid-twentieth century—Williams's *Paterson*, H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, Pound's *Cantos*—male and female authors alike were to explore the possibility of a full-scale regeneration, a sacred marriage that would unite female and male, spiritual and physical, Logos and matter. The sacred marriage is itself one of the most powerful images associated with the Mysteries, an image of integration, reconciliation, consummation; its evocation in the most ambitious poetic works of the century is a subject for a separate study. Strikingly, however, from the last volumes of these epics on, male interest in the story of Persephone and her Mysteries lapses dramatically, whereas contemporary women writers become more and more obsessed with this myth. Kathleen Raine, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton revert again and again to it; Celia Gilbert in *Queen of Darkness* (1977), Margaret Atwood in *Double Persephone* (1961) and *Lady Oracle* (1976), Daphne Marlatt in *Touch to My Tongue* (1984), Michèle Roberts in *The Mirror of the Mother* (1986), Jenny Joseph in *Persephone* (1986), Carol Rumens's *The Greening of the Snow Beach* (1988), Marlene Nourbese Philip in *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989), Catherine Bateson in *Pomegranates from the Underworld*, and Rita Dove in *Mother Love* (1995) devote poetic sequences or entire volumes to the tale, and feminist fantasy is deeply influenced by it, from Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* (1985) and Sheri S. Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* (1988) to Tepper's *The Family Tree* (1997). It is in fact hard to imagine contemporary women's poetry and fiction without the Persephone myth in its now all-but-innumerable versions. Rewriting Persephone and Demeter has become one of female writers' chief ways of exploring the mother-daughter bond and, on a larger scale, the variegated bonds between women.

For our present purposes, however, the extraordinary later developments of the myth are less important than the questions, What can we learn from the developments that we have traced so far? How does Persephone function in the culture of the long nineteenth century—as a symbol, a horror, an exemplar, an archetype, a goddess?

When she re-enters English literature in 1820, she seems predominantly an embodiment of the Romantic self—the self that loses and regains mother earth. For Mary Shelley, Aubrey de Vere, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, Proserpina is a young and naive creature, the lost "everydaughter" longing to renew a connection with her mother. Yet she seems also quickly to become the growing child who discovers that she and her mother are not one entity; further, she is the adolescent eager to explore a world apart from her mother's world and to escape her mother's sexual and intellectual control. By the end of the period explored in this book,

she is also a young woman rejecting the socialization of which the mother is the chief instrument—rejecting, that is, the model of womanhood that in some sense Demeter represents. In her ambivalence, Persephone becomes quickly a complex archetype of young womanhood at several stages of development. Sometimes tender and loving, sometimes impertinent or downright hostile, within the mother-daughter relationship, she is something of a rebel.

At the same time, depending on how the myth is manipulated in each version, Persephone combines aspects of the rape victim, the fallen woman, and the wife; she is a medium by which writers can explore male-female dynamics, social anxieties relating to sex, and the institution of marriage in its more sombre aspects. From the late Victorian age on, the question is repeatedly posed, How is Persephone affected by her experiences in the underworld? How might she be changed by her return? She becomes the exemplar of a dynamic goddess, a goddess who changes and grows and must learn how to deal with the consequences of her trauma. (It is not surprising that in H.D.'s late epic, *Helen in Egypt* [1961], Helen identifies herself as Persephone precisely at the point when she is undergoing a kind of psychoanalysis at the hands of Theseus, as H.D. herself did with Freud, recapitulating her distresses and exploring her own needs and powers.) This is an especially important development since, up to this period, mature women were themselves rarely perceived as growing and dynamic beings; the appearance of Persephone as a flexible figure, learning from life and death, both reflects and reinforces a new vision of women in Western culture.

Yet we must not be too triumphalist here. The bittersweet open ending of the myth allowed for an extraordinary array of readings, and we have seen a surprising number of retellings of the story that end with Persephone's return to hell. From Swinburne's Proserpine poems onward, we are reminded that this is a goddess of death. In that capacity she can be a soothing lover, as in Swinburne's "Hymn to Proserpine," or a sinister and irresistible force, as in Wharton's short story "Pomegranate Seed." More grimly still, she appears in *fin-de-siècle* verse as an icon of nonbeing, the blank behind a meaningless and valueless universe. As her underworld modulates around her, first to a pale and joyless garden and then to an urban wasteland, Persephone comes to stand for a peculiarly modern despair or, for the modern psyche trapped within such despairing alienation, such depression. Yet the horrific associations she acquires in post-Swinburnean poetry actually make possible the most positive developments in this tradition.

Swinburne placed the figure of Persephone firmly within the context of the great spiritual crisis in the late nineteenth century, that lapse of nerve and loss of spiritual connection that made pessimism for a while so popular. The tragic vision that, as Nietzsche insisted, is the necessary preliminary to Dionysiac art and union with "the primal Being" ("The Birth of Tragedy" 102) is shadowed forth in the sombre experience of the *fin-de-siècle* Persephone, and for the more hopeful Modernists, she comes to have a twofold function. On one hand, she is the model of the psyche that, facing the worst, can see beyond the worst, undaunted; on the other hand, the story of her return from the underworld shows her as a regenerating energy in her own right. Sometimes she is merely a metaphor, but in certain texts

(notably those by Cather and D.H. Lawrence), she is part of a spiritual vision that the author clearly takes very seriously. Through the debates and experiments of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Persephone at last emerges as a goddess, or as a particularly significant and helpful part of that divine energy that flows through our world. While the goddess movement is still in its infancy today,²¹ Persephone (not to mention other goddesses celebrated in the same period) could be seen by the 1920s as a figure capable of shaping and embodying genuine spiritual potencies that have affected contemporary women's spirituality and neopaganism. The holiness and beauty of the body; the "stark glory of the intellect" (*Asphodel* 170); the power to articulate and to prophesy and to dismantle false myths while developing new forms of spirituality and new social systems; above all, the ability not only to create new life but also to spark revitalization in others—these are all aspects of female divinity that we can see women beginning to reclaim and to celebrate within a specifically religious context, early in the twentieth century. Just as *Ántonia* in Cather's novel shows powers and interests beyond those that her worshipper Jim ascribes to her, so Persephone in the early twentieth century seems at times an independent power beyond the innumerable roles projected onto her. Critics of Ezra Pound's work in particular verge occasionally on presenting her as a living muse, "[a]s if Persephone were his guide toward the light he sought, as if she, the power of renewal, had chosen him and not he her" (Davenport 148).²²

For those who do not believe in sacral energies outside the human psyche, Persephone can still function as a symbol of the subjectivity, in its recurrent returns to hope, to life, to its own wholeness. Her odd, moving, sometimes terrifying story, with its colourful reversals and uneasy ending, remains of infinite promise to a fragmented and alienated age; the social, familial, and spiritual problems that story exposes remain painfully relevant and challenging.

²¹ Charlene Spretnak in "The Myth of Demeter and Persephone," which appears in one of the most influential anthologies of the goddess movement (Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ's *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*), retells Koré's story in a way that "seeks to approximate the original" pre-patriarchal version of the myth, omitting the rape and presenting the goddess as descending to the underworld of her free will, to receive and initiate the dead (72–6).

²² Similarly, Carne-Ross has argued that Pound opposes and rejects "the great principle of inwardness or internalization that has put man at the center of things and laid waste the visible world": "The green tip that pushes through the earth does not stand for or symbolize man's power of spiritual renewal ... That green thrust is itself the divine event, the fruit of the marriage at Eleusis. Persephone is in that thrusting tip" (214).



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Appendix A

The Sinister Influence: Causes of *Fin-de-Siècle* Pessimism

“From the thoughtless votary of idle pleasure to the deep thinker ..., the sinister influence of the doctrine spreads.”

—Louis J. Block, “The Fascination of Pessimism” (1907) 409

Between 1890 and 1912, well over a hundred articles appeared in British and American journals attempting to analyze the extraordinary popularity and intellectual dominance of pessimism. The causes adduced to explain this phenomenon included “the converging influences of modern realism and romanticism,” as nostalgia brightened a vanishing past and realism shed a harsh light on the failings of the present; the “abnormal growth of compassionate philanthropy,” which encouraged a painful sensitivity to human suffering (“Modern Pessimism” 623, 624); the collapse of dominant modes of faith, without the appearance of a widely satisfactory replacement (Pearson 449); and the discoveries made in “cosmic law” that had called into question essential principles both of religion and of ethics (Myers 189–90). Special emphasis was placed on the West’s newly acquired awareness of “the cruelty of nature,” “the brutality of unconscious forces,” and the appalling prospects opened by materialist determinism (“Modern Pessimism” 626):

To this must be added a prevalent disappointment with the actual results of modern civilisation as compared with the expectations raised a hundred years ago when ‘the age of progress’ started on its victorious career (“Modern Pessimism” 626)

Or, as Alfred Austin put it,

The boastfulness, the sanguine expectations, the confident prophecies of olden times are exchanged for hesitating speculations and despondent whispers. (172)¹

In a sense, the very successes of the Victorian age—its innumerable reforms and improvements, so laboriously achieved—coupled with the continuing spectacle of human misery only encouraged “a growing scepticism in the power of ... institutions or legislative measures to ameliorate the social condition of the people” (“Modern Pessimism” 627). To all this some commentators added “the monotony of civilisation” (Pearson 446), and it may well be that, as Eugen Weber

¹ For a more recent survey of the causes of pessimism, see Goodale 241–61.

has suggested, “the notions and activities of decadence” (pessimism included) “are closely related to the growth of a leisure class that was socioeconomically irresponsible, frustrated, and *disponible*” (15). Anxieties about the development of socialism and the possible extinction of individualism, fears of “the malign power of money,” the “red terror,” or the “yellow peril”—all these may have further encouraged or been encouraged by “the gloom of modern pessimism” (“Modern Pessimism” 627). The influence of Buddhist philosophy was also noted at the time; pessimism was described as “a contagious disease from the far East” (Greenough White, *A Study of Modern Pessimism* 345).² (Language that medicalized pessimism as an “intellectual epidemic” or “recurring malady” was common; of Schopenhauer’s vision it was said, “‘cancer-pessimism’ some call it.”)³ Then there was the influence of individual writers. In articles written around the turn of the century, the literary figures most often invoked are Giacomo Leopardi, Leconte de Lisle, Thomas Hardy, Heinrich Heine, Charles Baudelaire, and Lord Byron. As I have shown in Chapter 1, the pessimism that Swinburne had long since abandoned also continued to exert a powerful influence through the sustained popularity of his early works.

² Within Britain, specifically, anxiety was rising at the turn of the century on economic grounds: Britain was “no longer even first among nations in wealth or credit, in manufacturing, mining, weaving, commerce. Primacy lost in all” (Carnegie 903).

³ See “Modern Pessimism” 625, 631.

Appendix B

Proserpine: A Bibliography

Yisrael Levin

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English literature presents hundreds of references to Proserpine (or Persephone). However, like many other Greek deities, she often functioned merely as a marker of a writer's education and familiarity with the classics. The works here listed were chosen, therefore, because they either focus on her character or introduce an interesting interpretation of her myth. As such, they do not use the goddess as a pseudo-classical embellishment but treat her as a figure of real literary interest.

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